

C L A S S I C   T H I N K E R S

# Marx

Terrell Carver



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# Series page

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# **Dedication**

For my six (so far)  
grandchildren

# Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to numerous students and colleagues over the years who have contributed in incremental, but hugely important ways to this book, and have made it tremendous fun to write. Also heartfelt thanks to two assiduous reviewers who contributed greatly to the final draft. And I owe particular thanks to George Owers, editor at Polity Press, who thought that I ‘might have something to say’.

[Chapter 1](#) is an edited version of a previously published article: Terrell Carver, ‘Making Marx Marx’, *Journal of Classical Sociology* 17:1 (2017): 10–27; used with permission.

## Abbreviations

<i>CW</i>	Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, <i>Collected Works</i> in 50 volumes (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2004).
<i>EPW</i>	Karl Marx, <i>Early Political Writings</i> , ed. and trans. Joseph O'Malley, with Richard A. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
IWMA	International Working Men's Association, 1864–76.
<i>LPW</i>	Karl Marx, <i>Later Political Writings</i> , ed. and trans. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

# Timeline

<b>Date</b>	<b>Marx</b>	<b>Engels</b>
1818	Born 8 May in Trier in Rhenish Prussia, now in Germany	
1820		Born 28 November in Barmen in the Prussian Bergisches Land, now Wuppertal, in Germany
1836	Attends Bonn University	
1837		Leaves school to work for family firm
1838	Attends Berlin University	
1841	Receives doctoral degree from Jena University	Undertakes military service in Berlin and attends lectures at the University
1842	Writes articles for the <i>Rheinische Zeitung</i> in Cologne	
1843	Marries Jenny von Westphalen, begins MSS studies (posthumously published as <i>Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right</i> )	
1844	Moves to Paris, continues manuscript studies (posthumously published as 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts'), and edits <i>Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher</i> with Arnold Ruge, including two articles by himself and two by Engels	Writes <i>The Condition of the Working Class in England</i> ; visits Marx in Paris with 'Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy'

<b>Date</b>	<b>Marx</b>	<b>Engels</b>
1845	Publishes <i>The Holy Family</i> by Engels and Marx, moves to Brussels and continues mss drafts with Engels (posthumously edited into book-form as <i>The German Ideology</i> )	Travels to Manchester with Marx
1847	Publishes <i>The Poverty of Philosophy</i> , and 'Discourse on Free Trade'	Writes drafts for Communist League
1848	Publishes (anonymously) 'Manifesto of the Communist Party'; moves back to Paris on invitation of revolutionary government, and then moves to Cologne	Works with Marx on the 'Manifesto' and on the <i>Neue Rheinische Zeitung</i>
1849	Emigrates to London	
1850	Edits revived newspaper as 'Organ of Democracy'	Joins family firm in Manchester
1851	Writes <i>The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte</i> , published 1852; begins writing for American and other newspapers and encyclopedias	Assists Marx with journalism and reference works
1857	Returns to substantial work on 'Critique of Political Economy' (posthumously published as <i>Grundrisse</i> )	
1859	Publishes 'half-volume' <i>A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy</i>	Publishes review of Marx's book
1864	Begins working with IWMA	
1867	Publishes <i>Capital, Volume 1</i>	Publishes reviews of Marx's book
1869		Retires from employment and moves to London
1871	Publishes 'The Civil War in France'	
1872	Revises <i>Capital, Volume 1</i> for French translation	

<b>Date</b>	<b>Marx</b>	<b>Engels</b>
1875	Writes 'Marginal Notes' (posthumously published as <i>Critique of the Gotha Programme</i> )	
1883	Dies 14 March in Kentish Town, London	Delivers 'Graveside Speech'
1895		Dies 5 August in Primrose Hill, London

# Introduction

## Another Marx

Karl Marx's works have had a multi-faceted and multi-functional appeal to all sorts of audiences, political and otherwise, since the early 1840s, though during his lifetime (1818–83) he had relatively few readers and little if any fame. His first mass audience was in the partisan context of the international socialist movement of the later nineteenth century, and after that he occupied an iconic position in its rival communist successors and state-structures from the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 up to 'the fall of the Wall' in Berlin in 1989. In a much more limited way this kind of twentieth-century Marx-worship persists into the present, though now mostly marginalized and increasingly tenuous. All through these posthumous developments the relationships between the historical 'real-life' Marx, the Marxisms attributed to him, the iconic Marx of parade-banners, and the actual politics of Marxist movements, leaders and states has been a maelstrom of complex political, ideological and academic negotiations and conflicts. These processes have included the Cold War and Iron Curtain great-power confrontations, as well as formidable amounts of national liberation, revolution, subversion, intervention and regime change, together with considerable violence all across the globe.

However, the historical Marx and his intellectual legacy have only aroused much specific and respectful academic interest from the later 1930s. That Marx – 'great thinker' and would-be revolutionary – was then criticized in the 1950s, revived in the 1960s, reconstructed in the 1970s, and re-interpreted in post-Marxist readings since the later 1980s. More recently since the 1990s and into the new millennium Marx has been considered by some to be a major theorist of globalization, occupying an important position within global studies and international political economy. During and after the global financial and economic crises of 2008 Marx was invoked both by activist groups and communities, and by political economists and broadsheet journalists, even making the cover of international news magazines and featuring in TV documentaries.



During the last decade post-colonial and ‘de-colonizing’ scholars have split decisively in how they view him: irremediably Eurocentric, ‘white’ and Westernizing, or early-off-the-mark with a global view of colonial expropriations and colonized dependencies. In some form or another, or in some way or another, Marx is back!

But then as a world-wide political reference-point and easily recognizable image in popular culture, and as an established figure in educational curricula and academic debates all over the world, Marx never goes away, and despite efforts, he never will. However, given that the political culture and ruling institutions of his day have long vanished, he has necessarily become something of a spectre. Or rather his vanished context, and his lived-experience within it, have come to haunt the different ways that his writings – the ones published in his lifetime, and the voluminous manuscript materials posthumously collected – have been interpreted to date by scholars, commentators, broadcasters and media intellectuals, as well as by Marxist-activists and vigilant anti-Marxists. While it is true that over the decades his works have acquired ‘a life of their own’, it is also true that what readers know of his life, or do not know, or think they know, invariably affects what he is thought to be saying to them. And that in turn will affect what conclusions they will want to draw from their interpretive encounters with the ‘great man’ and his works.

While the bare biographical facts about Marx – birth, marriage, death; youthful optimism, middle-aged tribulations, old-age miseries – are pretty much beyond dispute, the life-story that arises in differing biographical narratives necessarily generates controversy. If Marx had had an academic post (as he once desired in his student days) and had therefore generated a string of major tomes in philosophy, economics or sociology (which is generally where his output lands today on physically separated library shelves or in virtual classification systems), then there would be far less room for disagreement about what he was actually doing during his lifetime and what he might have wanted others to accomplish. As an academic Marx would be framed with a much better fit between his activities and lived-experience, on the one hand, and our perception of him and reception of his works, on the other. He would sit in a room and write down what he was thinking that was worth writing down. But as a political activist – and indeed one who scorned

would-be radical intellectuals in no uncertain terms – Marx poses peculiar problems for academic study.

Notwithstanding biographical efforts to smooth this over, the pervasive image ‘Karl Marx: Man and Fighter’ (quoting the title of an early biography)<sup>1</sup> generates interpretive disjunction in every direction. Given his radical political commitments from a very early age, which are generally summarized in terms of Enlightenment and French revolutionary ideals, why does he make such a passionate and brilliant contribution to German philosophy? Given his famous claim that ‘history is the history of class struggles’,<sup>2</sup> why is there no sociological theory of class? Given his commitment to the international socialist movement, and his prominent role in the International Working Men's Association (IWMA), why did he labour so long over such a vastly obscure ‘economics’ as *Capital*?

In his own time Marx was referenced as a formidable intellect, but regarded personally as rather a force of nature. And indeed it was only a very few people, in very limited circles, who were making these judgements and observations, sometimes long after the fact. During his lifetime he had several ‘goes’ at explaining himself to a reading public – saying who he was and (in censored publications) what he was doing. This public proved to be very small indeed, even at the very twilight of his career. While often repeated in biographical accounts, his brief paragraphs of autobiography and auto-bibliography bear little relation to the way that he has been – over the years – politically demonized, and alternatively iconized, as well as intellectually ‘made-over’ in contrasting ways. Marx has been portrayed as an undemocratic, sometimes anti-Semitic and cultish ‘Red Terror’ thinker, and conversely he has been memorialized as an indispensable ‘great man’ of worldwide, working-class and even peasant-led revolutions of national liberation and industrial modernization. And in rather less technicolor terms, he has been adopted within the academy as a ‘great thinker’ and parcelled out subject-wise as described above. But since the 1990s he has become less common as an image on national regalia, public monuments and household busts, and more common in print-form in textbook-readers, collected works and popular, ‘humanizing’ biographies.<sup>3</sup>

These are widely different Marxes, and each one has taken a lot of work to make.

It is therefore somewhat misleading to the reader to start a book on Marx in the usual way of intellectual biography, setting out his early life and influences, summarizing his early, middle and late works, recounting familiar life-cycle milestones, recycling the few amusing anecdotes that survive and summing up what contribution his ‘thought’ has made, overall, to philosophy and/or sociology and/or political theory and/or economics. As we have noted already, and as we will find in the ensuing chapters in detail, these academic categories do not make much sense when we examine Marx's works in his own context, given his political activist and concomitant anti-academic stance. And anyway he made it abundantly clear himself that ‘thought’ was not what he was actually doing: in an early ‘note to self’ he wrote that, ‘The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world ... the point is to *change* it’, lines that have helped to bring him posthumous fame.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the political and social context that Marx was confronting in mid nineteenth-century Europe does not make all that much sense to us today in any very straightforward way, given that it is now 200 years since his birth. Therefore we need to take a long hard look at what *we* are doing, before we take up the ‘Marx question’.

## More Marxes than Ever

Marx wrote a lot of words, a huge amount of which have been preserved. An enormous number of words have been written about him, but only since his death (hardly anyone wrote about him prior to that). Reconstructing Marx from his words – and noting those of others, whether written with favour or in criticism – has proceeded on an industrial scale ever since. And very recently this now familiar process has accelerated. The approach I have adopted in this introductory book is not strictly concerned with what Marx wrote but rather with what he was *doing* when he wrote what he wrote. Thus he is not being considered here as a philosopher, economist, political ‘thinker’ or some forbidding intellectual who needs ‘humanizing’. Very few of the writers who have written about Marx were political activists, as he was, commencing this ‘career’ when he was about

twenty-four years old and continuing with it for the rest of his life. And even if some of these commentators were political activists, they were not doing exactly what he was doing in the way that he did it, not least because times change and politics with it.

This means that ‘what Marx wrote’ (or more usually in commentary, ‘what Marx thought’) has been framed – not so much out of context – as inserted into a writer-created context that was not his. Broadly speaking, this posthumous context is one of intellectual biography (of him, as an intellectual) and commentary by intellectuals (on him, which was not how he saw himself). And generally these expositions proceed by presuming an implausibly continuous coincidence between thought and writing, as if Marx always wrote down what he thought, and only thought what he wrote down (and as if all he wrote down that is preserved – a happenstance process – comprises this personal universe). However, your author here is not Dr Who, and you will not be entering a time-machine in order to re-create Marx's lived experience ‘in context’.<sup>5</sup> Instead I have focused this book on the present, which is where readers are, in order to see how Marx looks from a point of view that can be shared, I hope, between author and reader. Moreover, taking this perspective I have aimed – rather against the grain – to explicate what we share today with Marx (or at least arguably share), rather than how different he is in the historical sense, and how odd he looks in the intellectual sense, as is the general trend in intellectual biography. Of course there are numerous differences of both kinds that have to be reckoned with: Marx is not available, either, for time-travel, so that he could persuade us to ‘fuse our horizons’ in lively conversation.

The chapter themes I have selected for this book are thus not the ‘usual suspects’, such as dialectic, materialism, idealism and science, that we encounter when Marx is presented to us either intellectually (in an oddly politicized context) or politically (in an oddly intellectualized context). The structure of this book derives instead from concepts that are current today and in most contexts unremarkably normal in liberal democracies. But these concepts also derive from Marx's activist context in coalitional politics when both liberalism and democracy were remarkably incendiary.

Thus what we share with Marx is not – following this logic – what he is most famous for since his death, given that his posthumous fame was constructed in order to make him consistently and uniquely doctrinaire, and thus politically potent. What counts as radical views and radical politics changed quite markedly in his later lifetime, and what made him ‘fit in’ with radicals in earlier times became no longer quite so interesting, even then. My point, however, is not to prove that Marx is no longer radical – far from it. Much of the interest in Marx since the financial crises of the later 1990s onwards has resurrected him precisely to make current radicalisms work. On the one hand this is a welcome change from the Cold War days when Marx's radicalism was identified as something that would never work, and – much worse – would necessarily unleash unimaginable evil and cause the downfall of civilization. On the other hand, perhaps it is not the most radicalized Marx (in the sense of politically distinctive and intellectually unique) who is the really valuable one to speak to us in our situation. I note – with relief – that very few today are arguing that he, and he alone, can ‘save us’ (and he was certainly on-record as saying that that was not his job).<sup>6</sup>

Thus this book is organized around concepts and ideas that are ‘in Marx’ textually *and* in use today, in both academic and activist contexts. The organization of this study is therefore somewhat opposed to both traditional academic and *engagé* activist narrations of Marx's ‘life and thought’, which generally proceed textually (through ‘great works’) and contextually (through political failure and personal misery) decade-by-decade. It is also opposed to overtly thematic ‘readers’, which introduce complete or excerpted texts, with minimal attention to context, either of the past or the present, thus through abstraction forcing a ‘philosophical’ or ‘theoretical’ consideration of his words. The starting point for this book is firmly with present-day political issues that are often in the news, but then showing how ‘a Marx’ has been constructed over the years to speak to continuing issues of this kind, but paying due attention to his own socialist activisms and political strategems as they unfolded.

Marx worked in an acknowledged (though somewhat misunderstood) partnership with Friedrich Engels (1820–95), but the two will be treated here as separate individuals and intellects, rather than presumed always to be in agreement, or dividing tasks,

or writing complementary discussions, such that one speaks for the other, and quotations can be deployed interchangeably.<sup>7</sup> The relationship between their activities, works and ideas as friends and comrades will thus emerge in a scrupulously historical and textually faithful way. Overall the aim here is to present another ‘Marx’, one who speaks to the present through concepts-in-use, both by activists and by academics. Marx's activism was not focused on a narrow (and eventually sectarian) conception of what it is to be Marxist (or even Marxian) but rather on how to reach audiences of the time in order to make a difference politically. Interestingly these concepts tend to coincide with ones still in use today for much the same purposes, which – in mainstream politics – do not often succeed now by referencing the language of Marxism. Or to put it another way, social democrats, ‘progressives’ and social liberals today overlap considerably with this vocabulary, because that was the milieu through which much of Marx's activism worked at the time. This requires some historical adjustment, of course, not least in grasping that to be democratic and liberal in Marx's day – not just a ‘way out’ socialist or communist – was to be by definition a dangerous radical, an immoral subversive and a treasonous trouble-maker.

This approach also resists traditional political and academic pedagogy, which – in various ways – has presumed that induction into arcane philosophical debates forms a necessary preamble to an engagement with Marx. Indeed in his later years Engels himself encouraged just this sort of framing, delivering lecture-like materials on materialism, idealism, dialectic, science and the like.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent commentators have filled out this framework with enquiries and arguments that are certainly of academic interest, but were not – for just that reason – attuned to the thrust of Marx's politics as he pursued it. The overall effect of this Engelsian reception is to limit access to Marx's thinking, since so much difficult preliminary study is supposedly required. It also overlays the politics with philosophical concerns, from which political connections must be drawn out, which is somewhat the reverse of the way that Marx worked. This philosophizing of Marx's activism has drained away the political mind-set through which he operated, and stifled the political engagements that he tried to stimulate in his readers.



Moreover, the approach in this book will also resist a ‘fetishism of the archive’ through which Marx has been narrated since the 1920s, as scholars have sought novelty and surprise. While there is nothing wrong with archival research, and indeed it can be very revealing, this scholarly enterprise has tended to undermine the authority and interest of the works that Marx actually published himself (only two of which were in fact overt collaborations with Engels). The production and publication history of most of Marx's works is highly complex, but on the whole he showed much more interest in re-starting projects afresh than in recycling in retrospect what he had put aside, probably not for posterity. With characteristic acerbity about himself, he once commented in print that one whole set of manuscripts had been ‘abandoned ... to the gnawing criticism of the mice’,<sup>9</sup> while he himself had – quite characteristically – moved on, often to the frustration of his family, friends and associates.

The thematic discussions in each chapter below will be enlivened with some less familiar textual quotations and excerpts, namely from Marx's journalism, a characteristic vector through which he worked to change the world. Indeed what counts as journalism in his *oeuvre* – in the sense of a published political intervention – will be discussed when relevant, so that some traditionally ‘philosophical’ and/or ‘sociological’ and/or ‘theoretical’ and/or ‘economic’ and/or ‘historical’ works by Marx will begin to look rather different, and rather more like the political interventions that they were for him. Similar considerations apply to his correspondence, particularly when read alongside specific journalistic engagements, and collective activist commitments, so in that way we can see just how his political thinking operated within a given medium and with an intended public.

Overall I am aiming for a refreshed way of encountering Marx, taking on board scholarly researches of textual and contextual significance but also focusing the reader's attention on the roles that his ideas and thinking have come to play – even if in uncredited form – in today's political practices and academic cultures. It is hard to think of another ‘great thinker’ of modern times who has had more influence on lives, deaths and ideas than Marx. But then all those Marxes were not really him. His thoughts – or rather those that we have in published form – have been left to others to think and re-

think, whether in relation to global-scale political changes, or to set texts and student essays. While my approach does not aim to answer the impossible question, ‘What would Marx say now?’ it does encourage the practical question, ‘How does reading Marx stimulate me to think again?’

## Problems and Preliminaries

But in outlining what we share with Marx, and getting him into meaningful conversation with us, there are first of all some difficulties. Quite a lot of this book is directly concerned with those issues, so that after some thought and adjustment *in us* Marx begins to make sense. Thus the exercise here is not one of providing *his* context to the reader, but of alerting us to *our* contextual presuppositions and presumptions as readers, so that he appears somewhat less alien. In that way I am hopeful that readers will develop some critical thoughts on why they might find Marx interesting – and not just historical or curious – in the first place.

Thus there is a genre issue here, since this book is neither a biography (of an intellectual who thought great thoughts) nor a textbook (what you need to know to be an intellectual). It is rather a set of essays on topics to think about when reading Marx, dipping into the vast *oeuvre*, but not always finding the familiar texts and usual angles that will – for clarity and general information – also be rehearsed as we go along. If this approach works, I will have shown something about how and why Marx was thinking about things that interest us vitally today, but not in the way that most ‘Marxes’ have been constructed to speak to various reading publics. Of course Marx was not doing what he was doing in his own time in precisely the same way as any of us are doing anything today, or for exactly the same reasons, but then no two among us thinks about politics today in precisely the same way and for exactly the same reasons, anyway. I trust the reader to accept that the orientation of this book in the present also makes due allowance for historical difference, and is not by definition anachronistic or pointless.

There are more intellectual biographies of Marx available than ever, and more reading of archives (and not just his) *into* these works as a



matter of their composition than anyone some years ago could have expected. There are also political primers available, giving lapidary accounts of ‘doctrine’ and fundamentals of his ‘ism’ (as if he and Marxism emerged together as one – which they did not). If we stick to the man (and take the ‘ism’ as a later intellectual abstraction and political project), then we will have fewer interpretive issues to contend with. Most importantly of all, this study will avoid projecting the various Marxisms that have emerged independently of Marx – including Engels's contemporary summaries of Marx's published thoughts – back on to the man himself, without precise historical warrant. Those who wish to start with Marxism and work back to Marx, and then forward to ourselves, are quite entitled to do so.<sup>10</sup> But the title and contention of this book is to stick to Marx – and to his activism and ours – and to leave more complex intra-Marxist engagements to other occasions and in-groups.

I have kept the citation of secondary works very limited in order to fit the conversational manner of the exposition, directing the reader (I hope) to items that I think are accessible and helpful in broadening understanding and promoting discussion, preferring always the most recent works. For reference back to Marx and his works, I have used the two-volume Cambridge University Press collection (*Early Political Writings* and *Later Political Writings*) along with the ‘standard’ English-language *Collected Works* by Marx and Engels (in 50 volumes).<sup>11</sup> While selecting only highlights, the Cambridge volumes are in paperback and affordable. The *Collected Works* are quite a lot more complete (though what exactly would constitute ‘complete’ in Marx's case has been a contentious set of projects over almost 100 years involving numerous political turmoils). Those with access to library services will have some chance of pursuing my use of this resource. I hope that this is a fair compromise, and that readers who become intrigued will find their way to as much Marx as we have in English, which in terms of readability is actually more than there is in his native German or in any other language. And of course there are numerous other popular selections or series-volumes of Marx's and Engels's works available in print, second-hand or on-line.<sup>12</sup>

I include a helpful timeline, showing notable dates for both Marx and his career-long friend and sometime collaborator Engels, thus providing a biographical and bibliographical spine to support the thematic chapters. There are also references throughout to accessible biographies so that readers can pursue further detail. The five thematic chapters will present selected ideas in pairs, first in their present-day context, and then working back to Marx himself through intervening receptions that readers are likely to encounter. Marx's real-life activism will thus be summarized in and through a set of usable concepts, deployed by him and in use by us today. This will avoid making a spurious claim that his 'thought' was a unity (or intended as such), that it culminated in tidy-minded 'theories' (or scientific or political 'doctrines') achieved largely through purely intellectual struggle, or that 'it' – the thought – was really Marx himself the political activist.

While scholars are not prone to advertising the imaginative element in their narrations, it is certainly in use here. Taking the 'activist' approach to Marx that I do, there is necessarily some element of speculative reconstruction. Marx was active in obscure networks and *groupuscules* that came and went without all that much contemporary notice, so the job of narrative reconstruction is much more difficult than if it had all been 'on the record'. In conversational terms – which is where a lot of his activity-time was located – people did not write everything down (or indeed anything down, usually), and more importantly, what got written down (and, at least occasionally, published) was quite context-dependent, almost always subject to censorship, and often *ad hominem*. Quite a lot of the *homines*, with whom Marx was involved, have themselves been devolved into obscurity by historians, which is not at all what happened to him, though not through much fault of his own. It is quite an effort to see him as in some ways equal to – and at the time considerably less than – those who are now remembered only as 'walk-ons' in his life-story, because biographers have constructed that story in a genre-dependent, Marx-centric way. If I had wanted to play safe in this book, I would have stuck to 'the words on the page' (which of course in their printed uniformity are nothing like the real pages that Marx himself was writing or even like the ones his publishers actually produced). However, I took the risk here – which

one has to do in attempting to regenerate the ephemeral activisms of the time – of filling in some gaps in the record, not least because record-keeping at the time would have played into the hands of the police and courts, who were generating their own ‘spectral’, ‘Red scare’ versions of these activisms anyway, ably assisted by politicians and spies.

Perhaps the genre here is something like the documentary film or historical drama: some of the dialogue is verbatim, but some of the reportage is in the spirit of what was (probably) going on. Overall I am aiming here for some sense of lived experience, rather than dead(ly) texts. However, if the exercise is successful it will not be because I have convinced anyone that Marx is right or even very readable all the time. Rather my index of success will be the moment when any reader's attention wanders off Marx and considers (or better, *reconsiders*) the pressing political issues of today.

## How It Works and What It Does

The issues and themes presented above are worked through in more detail in [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx”’, setting the stage for pairing conceptual ‘lenses’ in [Chapters 2](#) to [6](#), through which to view Marx's activisms, locating his words within his projects.

[Chapter 1](#) will explain how we got to a position at which Marx is ever-present. This opening chapter resists conventional approaches which argue that a constructed Marx is necessarily false to the ‘real’ one. Instead it explains how the first Marx arose as an artefact within specific political strategies undertaken *by Marx himself*, and how subsequent Marxes were constructed by biographers, commentators, politicians and activists right up to the present. But along the way we encounter the biographical ‘basics’ of his life, so that we gain some familiarity with his activities and times. This approach entails an expanded view as to what counts as politics, given the shifting terms through which political activism has been conducted in different historical contexts. It will also explain in detail how and in what ways Marx became an academic subject, and has thus had his works – and hence his politics – refracted through various disciplinary framings, chiefly in philosophy, sociology, economics and history. Moreover,

these framings constitute, to a great extent, Marxism as an ideology, revealing its quasi-academic rather than hands-on origins, claims to the contrary notwithstanding. But then this poses the problem of synthesis and reference – can what we know of Marx, and what we have of his works, only be understood with reference to these posthumous constructions of himself and his own ‘ism’ and ideology? Succeeding chapters proceed instead with concepts arising in the present, and work back through these phenomena of reception to the activist Marx in his ‘everyday’ context.

[Chapter 2](#), ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’, introduces the overarching and arguably most important concept associated with Marx that is still in use – class struggle – and the one that was most central to Marx's life, thinking and politics. The text will briefly review the commonplace theorizations of class through which contemporary politics proceeds, showing how political projects and academic analysis have worked together – and also in tremendous tension – to set this up as the ‘social question’. Class struggle in politics is sometimes conceived in opposition to, and sometimes an intersectional partner with, the ‘identity politics’ of race, gender, sexuality, religion and the like that has been ongoing, particularly since the 1950s. Class compromise, by contrast, is usually theorized in a negative relationship with Marx's revolutionary activity, but outside that context it is usually theorized in a positive relationship with the achievements of anti-authoritarian constitutionalism and social welfare states. Overall the chapter argues that these liberal achievements, following on from the European upheavals of 1848–9, have been received historically in a way that minimizes or erases the struggles and conflicts through which – against conservative and reactionary rulers and institutions – liberal democratic revolutions were actually achieved. Conventionally but counterfactually these achievements are often understood as the outcomes of peaceful compromises, a process about which Marx was a great deal more realistic (in terms of struggle) and of which he had some personal experience as a political activist (in making compromises).

[Chapter 3](#), ‘History and Progress’, illustrates the way that contemporary politics of liberal democratic and capitalist triumphalism reproduces the ‘history-lessness’ against which some Marxist activists – and many academics – have struggled,

particularly those concerned in recent years with genealogical and deconstructive approaches to decision and judgement in present circumstances. This concern with contingency and indeterminism has its roots in Marx's texts, but also its 'other' in older versions of Marxism and Marxist history, where concepts of determinism and science formed a powerful political conjunction, but one that has ultimately fallen victim to twentieth-century critiques. Marx's political focus on production, distribution, consumption and exchange as crucial elements in both everyday life in any period *and* in any investigation into history (including pre-history) has revolutionized historiography, at least in establishing an essential reference point for debate. Progress is perhaps less powerful an idea in contemporary politics than it used to be, but then any concern with human betterment (and perforce planetary conditions for humans) raises definitional issues relating to just what kind of society even marginal political adjustments 'for the better' are based on. Marx has been rather too easily dismissed as a visionary – and indeed some of the ideas attributed to him in this vein are spurious – but few who take this critical line do so in order to endorse visions of stasis or regress instead. There is truth in the catch-phrase, 'We are all Marxists now.'

[Chapter 4](#), 'Democracy and Communism/Socialism', presents what is now an increasingly important conjuncture. Throughout Marx's career and his subsequent receptions he and others have had a distinct interest in drawing a sharp line between his views as a communist (or later, socialist – the terms were not stable and distinct in those days) and the views of pro-democracy advocates and revolutionaries, where there are still substantial areas of debate in theory and difference in practice. However, Marx wanted to distinguish himself from other liberals (i.e. advocates of constitutional democracy) as a 'left' thinker, arguing that democratic governments must not leave economic and social problems solely to market-relations or only to organized charity or personal beneficence. And in fact he worked alongside such liberals, since all advocates of constitutionalism at the time were by definition traitors, rebels and revolutionaries – denominated as such by authoritarian, non-constitutional and deeply clerical regimes. However, as authoritarianism gave way (through struggle) to very limited forms

of democratization and the concomitant development of a public sphere of (still highly censored) debate, liberals drew a sharp line between themselves and their radical, still revolutionary former socialist and communist confrères. This chapter will lead the reader through this puzzling set of binary distinctions, and review Marx's very limited – but methodologically very interesting – refusal to discuss communist society – or even socialist transitional stages to it – in much detail.

[Chapter 5](#), 'Capitalism and Revolution', addresses Marx's undoubted strength in the present era, namely as capitalism's most trenchant and most thorough-going critic. Marx regarded capitalism – a self-expanding spiral of production for profit – as itself a revolution of the utmost significance in human affairs. This revolution, in his view, was reflected in long-term shifts in forms of government, legal and political systems, and the religious, intellectual and cultural practices through which social life is lived and 'made to make sense' for individuals. These practices were notably characterized by Marx as ideological forms through which struggles are envisaged and enacted. He spent his life investigating this global revolutionary phenomenon in all these aspects, such that the negative aspects of capitalism could be abolished but the productivity gains and technological improvements recouped and organized for the benefit of all. This put him squarely against the private property system through which inequalities in wealth and power characteristically arise, and against which – so he argued and campaigned – democracy would work and over which it would triumph. This chapter will explain that what Marx meant by revolution is generally unlike the commonplace negative view that violence in social change cannot be justified, rather than a realistic appraisal of historical fact; and also unlike the commonplace liberal view that democracy is merely a form or procedure invoking 'majoritarian' institutions and systems, rather than a substantive vision of human flourishing and specifiable package of likely policies.

[Chapter 6](#), 'Exploitation and Alienation', explores the contrast between an older 'economist' Marx and a youthful 'humanist' Marx that post Second World War academic reception has created. Marx's *magnum opus*, the first volume of *Capital*, was a thorough-going indictment of a logically specifiable system that was – and is –



creating increasing inequalities and disastrous crises, with global repercussions. His aim was to cut the ground from under the propertied elites and the contemporary social science – ‘political economy’ – that supported their power and influence in government and society. Marx's work is thus dedicated to defining and illustrating exploitation precisely and politically in its capitalist setting. But his reasoning is rather too close in discourse to the political economists of his time – and thus rather too far removed from present-day economics – to be readily understood today. Alienation, by contrast, derives from manuscript notes and sketches that Marx himself had left behind, as his thinking on these subjects and issues – crucial to him and to us alike – attained greater analytical precision and detailed empirical clout. Somewhat paradoxically this ‘early’ version of his ‘thought’ (rather than his concomitant activism) is what survives most commonly today as a canonical critique of capitalist society. This is because the apparently ‘philosophical’ character of his writing in these editorially fabricated texts now seems to transcend the disjunction between his later elaborated critique of ‘political economy’ and the presumptions of today's economics. This chapter explores the way that different readers have created different ‘Marxes’, even creating new ‘works’ for his canon.

Afterword: This concluding discussion will review and assess the various concepts and receptions detailed above and discuss the ‘usability’ of various ‘Marxes’ in future.

## Notes

1. See the dated but classic biography, Boris Nicolaevsky and Otto Maenchen-Helfen, *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter* (London: Methuen, 1936); this English translation was the first edition because the German typescript of 1933 could not be published under the anti-communist Nazi regime.
2. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, LPW 1; CW 6: 482.

3. For a self-consciously ‘humanizing’ biography, see Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999).
4. Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, *EPW* 116; *CW* 5: 5; emphasis in original.
5. As in Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: Liveright, 2013).
6. Marx commented in an Afterword (1872) to *Capital* that he was not ‘writing receipts [sic] ... for the cook-shops of the future’ (*CW* 35: 17).
7. For an analytical approach to the Marx/Engels question, see Terrell Carver, *Marx and Engels: The Intellectual Relationship* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983); for an alternative account, see S. H. Rigby, *Engels and the Formation of Marxism: History, Dialectics and Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).
8. For background and discussion, see Terrell Carver, *Engels: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 5; Engels’s understanding of ‘materialism’ conflated – as most exegesis and theorizing continues to do – matter-in-motion physics (as forces independent of human agency) with social activity as ‘economic’ (involving material forces and things, but clearly arising only from human actions); ‘idealism’ in the philosophical sense is the view that reality, and knowledge of it, is mind-dependent or otherwise immaterial.
9. Marx, ‘Preface’, *LPW* 161; *CW* 29: 264.
10. For a recent example of the genre, see Justin P. Holt, *The Social Thought of Karl Marx* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2015).
11. For details, see the list of abbreviations for this volume.
12. See the Marx–Engels Archive  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/index.htm>



# 1

## Making Marx ‘Marx’<sup>1</sup>

The context through which readers – academic and otherwise – have come to know Marx as ‘Marx’ was not discovered posthumously by assiduous biographers working through an archive. It was constructed by Marx himself in the first instance, and by others during his lifetime, and then posthumously after a gap of about thirty years. This context – biographical and bibliographical – has a profound effect now on who anyone thinks Marx is, when anyone reads about who he ‘was’. Suffice to say that Marx's biographers and bibliographers – subsequent to himself in this role – have had much more influence over what we now know about him than he did himself, even when he was trying to create a reputation. Or rather, what he told us about himself at different stages of his life has been assimilated in various selective ways to reinforce what the more-or-less authorized biographers – since the First World War – think we should know about his ‘life and thought’.<sup>2</sup>

And of course, as Marx was living the life, thinking the ‘thought’ and writing the works, an ‘everyday’ or lived-experience context of uncertainty and contingency was in place. Marx did not already know he was Marx the ‘great man’ and ‘great thinker’ in the later sense. Even when he was presenting himself to readers, and reviewing his life to date, he was forward-looking and action-oriented in relation to his presumed audience, rather than backward-looking over something already ‘done’ and therefore ‘to be known’, which is the biographer's-eye view. These accounts are couched in a genre that is neither the contingent everyday, since readers are presented with a life-story that has ended, nor the publicity-minded autobiographical and political, as Marx's self-characterizations certainly were.

This chapter reviews what we think we know about Marx in the light of the above perspectival analysis. But somewhat unusually it starts from how he presented his life himself, while he was living it. We then see the disjunction between his ‘everyday’ view of himself and

the ‘Marxes’ that have been constructed by biographers. The development of global access to Marx's writings also makes Marx in any number of versions – including authentic and imagined images – more visible than ever,<sup>3</sup> but in a variety of often inconsistent ‘great man’ and ‘great thinker’ guises. These Marxes will be discussed in detail here, with due regard to biographical ‘basics’ along the way, so that we get some sense of his life and times as we see what he and others made of it. That way what we read about Marx and by Marx, and concurrently what we might think about politics in the present, can get into dialogue in a well-informed way in subsequent conceptual chapters.

## **Marx's ‘Selfie’: No. 1<sup>4</sup>**

Marx's very first autobiographical characterization is seldom noted by biographers and commentators, yet it marks an interesting point in his early activities when, at the age of twenty-nine, he reviews himself to date and presents himself to an intended public. While the biographical facts recounted below are – since the mid twentieth century anyway – perhaps fairly familiar to many readers,<sup>5</sup> my focus on Marx's own view of them gives them rather a different significance. They are neither minor stepping stones on the way to works of greater significance, nor references to philosophical masterpieces rather carelessly cast aside but lurking in an archive. Instead these autobiographical reference points are alluded to by him as markers in the career of a budding writer/activist advertising himself – and his forthcoming (and first sole-authored) short book – as a politico-intellectual project of European import.

Born in Trier in the Rhineland (then Rhenish Prussia) in 1818 Marx had a classical German ‘gymnasium’ education leading to training in law (and also to some disgraceful ‘studenty’ episodes) at Bonn University and then (more temperately) at the University of Berlin, the Prussian royal capital. Marx was generally pursuing what in twentieth-century terms became recognizably a liberal agenda imbued with Enlightenment values, namely advocacy of popular sovereignty and competitive elections, representative and responsible government, and equality before the law under an

independent judiciary. Or rather, anyone pursuing this agenda did so within strict state censorship and under the hostile political climate of anti-constitutional monarchical authoritarianism and a similarly situated religious establishment. Undoubtedly this liberalism and republicanism reflected values held by at least a few in Trier, where Marx's father, Heinrich, and his father's friend and Marx's future father-in-law, Ludwig von Westphalen – both professional men – were themselves under some suspicion and surveillance for possible subversive tendencies.<sup>6</sup>

However, these are rights and liberties that were (to an extent) established in constitutional regimes only post First World War, and are therefore rather poorly characterized in the earlier context of the 1820s and 1830s by even Marx's earliest biographers. This was because the utter, grinding hostility of authority-figures and the ruling 'establishment' to at least some popular participation in representative institutions had largely faded by the turn of the twentieth century. But in the days of the *Vormärz* (i.e. before the western and central European revolutionary events of spring 1848) these rights and liberties were perceived as much, much more radical than they were fifty years later, even if put in mild-mannered reformist terms at the time. In Marx's early days liberalism was far from respectable and was indeed seditious and treasonable. To the established religio-political regimes it was the slippery slope to the extremisms and terrorisms of the successive and very proximate French revolutions of just a few decades earlier. Indeed the Napoleonic occupation of the Rhineland and the introduction of republican principles and values was utterly disavowed and suppressed by the restored Prussian regime post-1815, even if 'those days' of republican institutions were quietly revered by some as – in living memory – a progressive and 'enlightened' introduction of modernity.

Marx declined to follow his father into the law and took up philosophy instead, reading both classical authors and the works of the late G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), then renowned in central Europe as the foremost and quintessentially German of modern philosophers. At the age of 23 Marx submitted a doctoral thesis on classical Greek philosophy by post to the University of Jena, which he had never attended, and he subsequently abandoned any hopes of

an academic position, owing to governmental hostility to revolutionary radicalism and potentially treasonous actions. At that crucial point he took up political journalism, writing muck-raking reportage for a middle-class Rhineland newspaper, the *Rheinische Zeitung*,<sup>7</sup> during a brief period (1842–3) when the censorship in Prussia was relatively relaxed. His contributions included articles on agricultural poverty locally; angry editorials on press freedom, divorce law and similar civil issues; and *ad hominem* critiques directed at politically oriented ‘schools of thought’ that were then necessarily masquerading as merely of intellectual interest in order to get past the censors. As other editors and financial backers for the paper lost their nerve, Marx succeeded to the editorship and ‘toughed it out’ against constant police harassment.

After the Prussian government closed down this (for the time) liberal newspaper in Cologne, and after marriage and a honeymoon at a Rhineland spa town, Marx ventured once again in the autumn of 1843 into the same political/intellectual territory by co-editing the ‘special number’ (there was only ever one issue) of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*<sup>8</sup> of 1844, a highly collaborative and now very rare volume of political essays. Moving away from the repressive atmosphere and police repressions of the German states, Marx had set himself and his wife up in lodgings in Paris with other German radicals, where – so they hoped – their activities would not attract so much official attention. Edited by Arnold Ruge (1802–80) and Karl Marx (in that order) the dual ‘number’ of the periodical contained an exchange of politically themed correspondence between the two editors;<sup>9</sup> political contributions by the radical poets Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) and Georg Herwegh (1817–75); ‘Letters from Paris’ by Moses Hess (1812–75), the cosmopolitan communist theorist; and essays by Marx’s journalist colleague Ferdinand Coelstin Bernays (also known as Karl Ludwig, 1815–76); by the East Prussian (radical) liberal Johann Jacoby (1805–77); as well as two essays each by the up-and-coming Friedrich Engels of Manchester and Karl Marx the co-editor, who was not then otherwise in actual association with Engels.<sup>10</sup> The intention was to circumvent the censorship in the German states and to circulate the volume to German-speakers ‘back home’, in order to advertise and possibly supplement a radical collective that was both intellectual and, in some cases, co-

residential, in cheap lodgings abroad. The political project was broadly to overthrow the old-order monarchies and religious establishments east of the Rhine and thus to liberalize the political order and modernize the local economies, instituting civil rights, republican rule and free trade.

Working in conjunction with his new friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels, Marx next undertook a short-book venture, published in 1845 in Frankfurt-am-Main under the German censorship. This was *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer and Company*.<sup>11</sup> In it the two made a polemical attempt to 'out-radical' the stay-at-home radical-liberals in the German states, who were, in terms of background and university education, not very much different from Marx himself. Indeed the Bauer of the sub-title had been Marx's tutor and political confrère – launching rationalist and barely hidden atheist attacks on Christianity and thus on the Prussian monarchy – during his university days at Bonn. Unsurprisingly Bauer was dismissed from his university post. Given the censorship and quite narrowly targeted audience, Engels and Marx's satirical work made a splash, but in a very tiny pond, scoring points against intellectuals who looked like moderates only in relation to the radical fringe resident abroad.

Having schooled himself in communist writings of the time – which were utopian in various ways – Marx merged his journalistic concern with poverty-stricken workers<sup>12</sup> into conjunction with the rather more abstract – and rather less 'everyday' – political resolutions that were available. Perhaps unsurprisingly he and his family were expelled from France in the spring of 1845, and they set up again – in another liberal/radical/communist collaboration – in Brussels, where the police were somewhat less paranoid and certainly less efficient.

During 1845 to 1846, the two activists and now self-styled communists,<sup>13</sup> Marx and Engels – in conjunction with other collaborators – were engaged in drafting a sequel and stinging riposte to their objects of criticism – Bauer in particular – who had dared to reply to the scabrous book *The Holy Family* in unappreciative terms. In their view these responses were merely philosophical criticisms that missed the pressing concerns presented



by the economic realities of suffering and deprivation that were becoming clearly visible (as Marx's journalism had managed to demonstrate, just within the censorship at that point). But then after difficult and vexing experiences with various co-authors and publishers, such that hardly anything emerged (other than a box full of unfinished draft manuscripts), Marx went into print to tell readers something about himself. He posted a public notice of 8/9 April 1847,<sup>14</sup> which was published in the *Deutsche-Brüsseler Zeitung*,<sup>15</sup> an *émigré* paper in Brussels, and in the *Trier'sche Zeitung*,<sup>16</sup> his hometown paper in Trier. The details he recounts there are now obscure and were even then convoluted, but the Marx-project in self-publicity was clearly underway. Amidst his angry denunciation of a newspaper correspondent who had attributed works and remarks to him that he strenuously disavowed, Marx presented the unknowing reader with a view of himself and his activities for the first time. He was evidently assured at this point that there was something really to talk about, both in terms of his past accomplishments (of a bare four years) and future expectations, or at least he clearly wanted readers to think so.

The opening salvo of his then-untitled notice informs his German-speaking readers that he has a book in press *in French*,<sup>17</sup> through which he takes on a major figure in European intellectual and political life, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65). Proudhon's book *System of Economic Contradictions*<sup>18</sup> of the previous year had been widely reviewed and noted, and for educated Germans the French language, its literature and political thought were truly international and without equal. Moreover, in terms of works on the 'social question' – which covered enquiries into inequalities in wealth and power, i.e. the class divisions in modernizing societies – French writers, including, and especially, thinkers now classified as utopian socialists<sup>19</sup> – were authoritative. Marx was here in these newspapers trailing his next riposte: *The Poverty of Philosophy. Answer to the Philosophy of Poverty by M. Proudhon*.<sup>20</sup>

In an interesting publicity slant Marx promotes Proudhon as a major author of European repute, and thus himself as author of a major and wittily titled counter-blast, by denigrating a hapless German, the Karl Grün of the subject matter and later editorial title. Grün was

author of a supposedly comprehensive survey of social movements struggling against economic and political injustice (as they variously conceived of it) in France and Belgium in 1845. He was also just recently the translator into German of the very work of Proudhon's to which Marx was replying. Having disposed of a rival authority on social movements *and* on Proudhon's latest work, Marx informs his readers very directly:

My criticism of Proudhon is written *in French*. Proudhon himself will be able to reply. A letter he wrote to me before the publication of his book shows absolutely no inclination to leave it to Herr Grün and his associates to avenge him in the event of criticism on my part.<sup>21</sup>

Readers now know that the 'editor of the former *Rheinische Zeitung*', a locution and fact that Marx was careful to rehearse in his text, was the go-to source for the latest views and reviews of Proudhon's popular and contentious work. They could also deduce that the famous Frenchman had – as it happens – been in prior correspondence with the self-styled leading German journalist on the subject, namely Marx. Moreover, it was also evident that unlike other less enterprising and less talented Germans, he (Marx) was not only adept in French but establishing himself as an equal of and rival to a major European figure in intellectual and political life.

Rubbing in the lesson Marx then dismisses not only Herr Grün as any kind of competitor to himself, but also disparages his own German context and supposed associates for their small-minded effrontery in presuming that 'foreign socialism' was a subject about which they – rather than he – were competent to comment on for the benefit of 'the German world'. In a final twist Marx then presents Grün as credulous rather than as a credible source of enlightenment in comparison with Marx's own newspaper articles – which he is clearly signalling as intellectual milestones of general interest.

This was particularly the case in relation to Proudhon's 'economics'. Marx's characterization of Proudhon's Hegelian work on a 'system of economic contradictions' as an economics is far from an accidental contraction. It was rather a signal to readers to listen up and read his forthcoming critique of the great Frenchman on *the* important subject, which marked an important move in socialist thinking away from utopianism and into modern practicalities. This was over and

above a critique of Proudhon's bad Hegelian – i.e. native German – philosophy, on which subject his readers would presume the young Marx's superior expertise anyway.<sup>22</sup>

## Marx's 'Selfie': No. 2

The next episode in making Marx 'Marx' coincided with his forecast engagement with 'economics', i.e. the political economy<sup>23</sup> of the time as published and discussed throughout the 1840s, and the theoretical and intellectual background to his excitingly *engagé* journalism (and very occasional speechifying) during the chaotic revolutionary events of 1848–9. With Engels, Marx revived his radical newspaper in Cologne as the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*,<sup>24</sup> making 'correspondent' trips as far afield as Vienna. The object was to keep German-speakers up to date with breaking news from France, where the 'July Monarchy' had been violently overthrown and a 'Second Republic' set up. Others on the paper picked up similar anti-monarchical revolts and revolutions across the German myriad states and the sprawling Austrian Empire, and eventually the paper chronicled the political regression and targeted repression that followed into 1849. By that time Marx and his family – along with numerous others – had fled, in their case to London, and in common with others, they were virtually penniless and precariously stateless.

During the intervening years to 1859 – and in proximity to the most advanced industrialized economy in the world and with world-class intellectual resources at the British Museum Reading Room – Marx made very detailed contact with authoritative sources on economic modernity, in the original French and English. These authorities were rather more interesting than Proudhon, even if they were not as politically prominent as the would-be radical had been during the heady days of the Continental *Vormärz*. Marx's interlocutors in his published *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,<sup>25</sup> such as Adam Smith (1723–1790), David Ricardo (1772–1823) and similar figures, were nearly all dead, and – with few exceptions – not noted as intellectuals who were over-much concerned with the 'social question' (except in decidedly non-socialist ways), their occasional doubts and misgivings about 'the poor' notwithstanding.



However, these political economists were – as Marx struggled to make obvious – far more influential in the practical terms set by modern, free-trading and commodity-producing societies than socialists and communists had yet managed to be: the socialist argument was that public control should trump the supposed self-regulating properties of market-relationships. And again he shifted languages – somewhat perversely it seems, given his post-revolutionary political exile in England from 1849 – by reverting to German, and thus necessarily to the German-speaking audience. Given the difficulties that the *émigré* Marx family faced during the 1850s, the use of German is understandable. But compared with his previous self-image as the next socialist of general European interest – the French-speaking equal of Proudhon – the reversion is a notable one.

Moreover, at this time – early 1859 – Marx also looked to Engels to present his *persona* to the world in the guise of book reviews planted in the German press. Marx's own autobiographical and auto-bibliographical Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859,<sup>26</sup> and Engels's summarizing review of Marx's book of the same year,<sup>27</sup> both had somewhat wider German-speaking contemporary audiences than the rest of his slim volume, where there is little evidence of impact. But both the Preface and (to a much lesser extent) the review have had popular and scholarly treatments – directly encountered or in paraphrased form – only in twentieth-century publications.

Marx's first and only self-conscious autobiography<sup>28</sup> is sketched in this Preface in a few rather disjointed paragraphs, as he was evidently up against a publisher's deadline, and unlike the press note of 1847, he shows some concern to tell the story of his life to date in a fairly fulsome yet precisely focused way. This Preface, of course, was also in a censored publication and, in any case, the genre of the *Contribution* was that of rigorous (*wissenschaftlich*) critique of a thoroughly serious, indeed rather famously dismal subject.<sup>29</sup> For Marx, though, this critique was rather more philosophical and critical in method than empirical and quantitative (that methodological 'turn' in academic study dates from the later 1870s).<sup>30</sup>

The text of the Preface was at hand for Marx's first biographer, Franz Mehring, writing during the First World War, and the biographical details and bibliographical listing are now perhaps overly familiar to some readers through repetition in numerous subsequent popular and scholarly biographies. It is worth somewhat de-familiarizing these passages here: readers should note Marx's lengthy treatment of the early journalism, now little read, even by specialists;<sup>31</sup> his highlighting of the published 'Introduction'<sup>32</sup> to a critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (but not 'On the Jewish Question';<sup>33</sup> his other contribution to the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, now carefully studied); and his studious avoidance of polemical escapades, such as his first jointly authored short-book, *The Holy Family*.

Many of today's readers might also wonder what happened to the 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844',<sup>34</sup> not hinted at in any way (though globally famous since the 1970s), and to the book-length study *The German Ideology*,<sup>35</sup> not referred to in Marx's text. In print today it is referenced as a title only in notes by twentieth-century editors to the Preface, concerned to reconcile the 1859 text to what readers would expect to see in mid century terms. Marx himself refers to an abandoned manuscript critique of 'the ideological view of German philosophy'. Both 'works' are now not only canonical but generally top of the list of excerpted 'must-reads' for students, though both were artefacts of twentieth-century editorial scissors-and-paste practices, coincidentally published 'in full' in separate volumes in 1932.<sup>36</sup>

Marx of course was keen to direct readers to writings – even if not book-length ones – that they could actually or least conceivably read: he specifically mentions the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party',<sup>37</sup> which is now also top of the canonical list, and often the first-placed item in selected works or 'readers'. But in 1859 it apparently had equal status with the French-language 'Discourse on Free Trade',<sup>38</sup> which is now seldom reproduced and very little read.<sup>39</sup> The French-language *Poverty of Philosophy* is highlighted but rather bracketed off as polemical by comparison with the present, *wissenschaftlich* and thus very sober critique of a literature, rather than of a person, who was by then somewhat eclipsed.

The next long paragraph of bibliographical information is quite striking: Marx notes his work on the revolutionary liberal/middle-class radical *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in 1848–9 as an interruption to his economic studies, and addresses his voluminous work (some of it written by Engels) for the *New-York Daily Tribune* in the 1850s in rather similar terms. But – warming to this journalism theme – he writes that ‘articles on current economic conditions in England and on the Continent [of 1857–8] formed such a significant part of my output [in the newspaper] [that] it became necessary for me to make myself conversant with practical details which lie outside the scope of political economy proper’.<sup>40</sup> Given that Marx was promoting himself as a studious critic of political economy, the presumptive hierarchy here reflects his interest in getting a serious-minded and politically active audience on-side. So – if we read these comments the other way round – his mentioning journalism at all makes an important point. In terms of his activist goals these were important and significant works.

Today's readers will also note the absence of *Grundrisse*,<sup>41</sup> an edited compilation of ‘economic’ manuscripts from just this period, now so canonical that it is commonly referenced as a ‘book’ – which, even at its first quite obscure publication as a manuscript collection in two volumes in 1939–41, it never was. Note also that the abandoned ‘Introduction (1857)’,<sup>42</sup> also mentioned in the 1859 ‘Preface’, was never an introduction to ‘it’, but rather to a preceding draft for what became (in truncated form) the published half-volume.<sup>43</sup> Overall Marx frames and ends his very short autobiography by identifying himself and his quite varied writings, as mentioned by himself, with ‘conscientious and lengthy research’,<sup>44</sup> which certainly seems fair enough. But his focus on published works and mass-circulation journalism, in explaining who he is and where his project lies, are certainly a telling contrast with what developed in succeeding years to make him a ‘great man’ and ‘great thinker’.

## Iconizing Marx<sup>45</sup>

In the 1860s Marx re-launched himself into organizational work as a socialist and communist, alongside the ‘lefty’ journalism undertaken

for a newspapers in the USA and on the Continent. While not a founder of the International Workingmen's Association in London in 1864, he was an early adherent and influential Council member. Since the early days of international communist aspirations – as with the two semi-clandestine meetings of the international components of the embryonic and merely aspirational ‘Communist Party’ in London in late 1847 – Marx made himself notable as a punchy writer, formidable thinker and economics-minded gadfly. In that way he was a committee-man, coalitional-operator and tireless correspondent and commentator. But at most he was himself a tendency, rather than a leader of even a faction. As an international organization, though, it was by definition disunited in any number of directions, not least in terms of nationalistic priorities and cross-national disputes, not to mention different versions of communisms, socialisms and reformisms or utopianisms. But as the 1860s wore on what caught up with it – in some locales – was the burgeoning strength of proto-labour-unions and proto-political-parties, fighting against the odds for toleration (a stage prior to legality) and making headway in the German states – in Marx and Engels's absence in England.

In 1872 a number of individuals – rather than Marx himself, or Engels in his publicity-manager mode – consciously embarked on a political process of constructing a *persona* for the pair of them (and the pairing is notable), perhaps rather surprisingly. That process was intended to create Marx as an iconic founding father of socialism, and in particular of a major tendency in the German socialist movement. It was also timed to take advantage of Marx's briefly notorious moment in the international limelight as a defender of the so-called ‘terrorists’ of the Paris Commune of the preceding year, and his authorship (in English) of a widely circulated encomium on those events commissioned by the IWMA.<sup>46</sup> This project in political icon-making was associated with the otherwise informal ‘Marx party’ – a loose grouping of German revolutionaries of 1848–9 who had returned from exile after the amnesty of 1862, though neither Marx nor Engels undertook this. After that, the faction developed around Marx's sometime friend and near-contemporary Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900), and a bit later the younger August Bebel (1840–

1913).<sup>47</sup> There was nothing inevitable about their decision to publish a little-known text, dating from twenty-five years earlier.

Those decisions were the ones that created Marx the ‘great man’ (if not quite the ‘great thinker’) as we know him. The mass recirculation of the ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’ (newly retitled *The Communist Manifesto*) in 1872, in a ‘feature’ edition with a signed authorial preface, sparked over the years an enormous number of reprints and translations. That process created Marx as a world-historical figure.<sup>48</sup> Until that point he was very little known, and then hardly ever favourably, outside the limited circles of German socialism, and even then, his ‘party’ (who were fans, really) was a faction within a much larger movement.

In the special Preface to the ‘feature’ edition of the *Manifesto* of 1872 – which Marx and Engels were pressed into writing – they sound really rather bemused about the re-publication of the somewhat scrappy little work of 23 pages. After all, they had written quite a few things that had had their day in the struggle, the work was anyway composed for a short-lived committee and, given that the political struggle for them was still very much on-going, what exactly was the point of looking back? Had the *Manifesto* really manifested not very much at all, and was not the real point to write a new one?

The practical application of the principles [of the *Manifesto*] will depend ... on obtaining historical conditions, and, for that reason, no special stress is laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of Section II. That passage would ... be very differently worded today ... Further, it is self-evident that the criticism of socialist literature is deficient in relation to the present time, because it comes down only to 1847; also, that the remarks on the relation of the Communists to the various opposition parties (Section IV) ... are antiquated ... But, then, the *Manifesto* has become an historical document ...<sup>49</sup>

Of all the pieces to pick to advertise Marx, and to set people straight about contemporary politics, this long-forgotten flash-off-the-press was for Marx and Engels themselves hardly the obvious choice. The ‘general principles’ said to be in the text, while broadly endorsed by the authors – but not enumerated there or in the new Preface – were



referenced only in relation to the recent events of the Paris Commune, and then the reader was directed to a document that was in fact up to date, namely ‘The Civil War in France’.

However, Liebknecht, Bebel and their colleagues in the early 1870s were rather better at ‘branding’ Marx than Engels had been in 1859 (or Marx himself in 1847), and the audience ‘hook’ was indeed to look backward. But this gaze was not to Marx as a person and what he had done in the revolution, since the goal of the exercise was different. The object was to get him (and the socialist party organization and the ‘Marx party’ tendency – internally conflicted as it was) much better known and mutually identified in the present. By 1872 the events and personalities of 1848 had faded enough into history to make a resurrection of the glory days of the revolutions an option. Looked at that way, the little cabal needed something colourful to head up their project that was not a heroic tale about a person (who might become inconvenient), yet would identify someone living (conveniently abroad) with the glory days and socialist truths. Only a very few had any knowledge of the *Manifesto* at all, and it was almost impossible to find and read. But it was a good choice. And fortunately yet another treason-trial had lately put the text into the public record and therefore out of the censor's reach.<sup>50</sup>

Even by the 1870s hardly any of Marx's chapter-length essays, short-books and his single substantial volume of 1867, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*,<sup>51</sup> were available, except in very limited editions of short print-runs for German-speakers, though doubtless some had a life in second-hand shops and hand-around usage, even if we do not really know what for. Marx and his writings were a long way from becoming an object of study (beyond the very occasional and tepidly respectful review), and his ‘thought’ – as the contemporary reference in the Preface of 1872 itself demonstrates – was addressed to and evaluated within on-going political circumstances. This applied to even the most ‘academic’ productions of (apparently) non-polemical, scientific [*wissenschaftlich*] critique. Given that the man was actually alive and politically engaged – in correspondence and international affairs – he could not be a cult figure of untimely transcendence, and he refused this by repute. Engels repeats Marx's overheard ‘I am not a Marxist’ remark (spoken in French) somewhat

differently in two items of correspondence after Marx's death,<sup>52</sup> but this quotation fits with the rest of what we know about the (not yet even then) 'great man' Karl Marx.

Choosing something untimely (that is, 'out of time') as the *Manifesto* then was, usefully displaces intra-tendency debate on contemporary questions. It does this by highlighting a supposed common heritage that is just far enough in the past to be beyond generating controversy in the present. The focus on Marx as lead author did much the same job as the re-publication of the text by the 'Marx party', despite his somewhat self-imposed status as an exile, his stylistic inaccessibility as author of *Capital*, and his scary reputation as a political operator. Engels, who had had by far the more brilliant career and public *persona* up to 1845, had by 1872 somewhat slipped from view into his self-adopted role as self-styled 'second fiddle'.

The re-publication of the *Manifesto* did not create Marx the 'great man'; but then Marx the 'great man' did not exist before the re-publication of this by then rather *outré* pamphlet. The highly readable text did its work over the next two decades in making the man great, though not at all for the reasons that he – so far as we can tell – really wanted, or Engels either. But then simple pictures are the easiest to 'get' – the man became great because he wrote the people's manifesto, and the people's manifesto cast greatness upon its author. The two became iconic together.

## Post Mortem, Resurrexit

The IWMA declined into near-non-existence in the 1870s, and Marx produced little of substance, other than a French translation (with revisions, 1872–5) of *Capital*,<sup>53</sup> and his life-story tails off to ill-health and family bereavements. After his own death in 1883, though, the situation changed quite dramatically in two ways. Engels's re-publication of some of Marx's works with new introductions and prefaces proceeded very much along the political lines outlined above. But Engels's own works, authorially introduced and successfully circulated, promoted his own projects, ideas, debts and glosses as following directly from, and intentionally supplementary to, Marx's 'thought'. Engels was a system-builder, and so presented

Marx the ‘great thinker’ as a scientist and philosopher in the way that these activities were conceived of in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>54</sup> While his ‘Graveside Speech’ for Marx, recorded in news reports and manuscript notes,<sup>55</sup> set the tone for Marx’s ‘life’ as a ‘great man’, Engels’s works – such as *Anti-Dühring*,<sup>56</sup> *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*,<sup>57</sup> *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*<sup>58</sup> and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*<sup>59</sup> – re-branded Marx as a ‘thinker’ over and above the political ‘greatness’ he had been awarded in 1872. Engels capitalized on his similar status, but not for himself. What could have been canon-confusion between the two was effectively smoothed over by the Marxism that emerged from the merged canon, though only after Engels’s death in 1895. This process was notably advanced by Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), Georgi Plekhanov (1856–1918), Antonio Labriola (1843–1904) and many others, political differences and partisan squabbles notwithstanding, and in the later 1890s an ‘ism’ was born.

The other key development making Marx ‘Marx’ was Franz Mehring’s (1846–1919) scholarly work on the Marx–Engels *Nachlaß*, the archival legacy, stored loosely in boxes and variously held or ‘loaned’ out by surviving family members and socialist party stalwarts.<sup>60</sup> His catalogue hand-list of 1902 laid the groundwork not just for his own intellectual biography of Marx as a ‘great thinker’, which – true to the genre – makes Marx a man of ‘works’ constituting his ‘thought’. This construction is then contextualized with ‘life’ interest and political narrative.

Succeeding chapters in this book, however, take a present-centred approach to concepts we share with Marx, and present him as an activist in his own ‘everyday’, rather than as a somewhat isolated ‘thinker’ wrestling with ‘thought’. Further aspects of his ‘greatness’ will be handled within this conceptual structure, thus avoiding a conflation of numerous Marxes with the realities of his activisms, yet providing a guide to the quite varied political ideas and intellectual inspirations that have evolved as ‘Marx’.

## Notes



- [1.](#) This chapter reproduces text from my article ‘Making Marx Marx’, *Journal of Classical Sociology* 17:1 (2017): 10–27.
- [2.](#) David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1973); Terrell Carver, *Friedrich Engels: His Life and Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1989).
- [3.](#) As discussed in the Introduction above.
- [4.](#) This section also draws on material published in Terrell Carver, ‘McLellan's Marx: Interpreting Thought, Changing Life’, in *Marxism, Religion and Ideology: Themes from David McLellan*, eds. David Bates, Iain Mackenzie and Sean Sayers (Milton Park: Routledge, 2016), pp. 32–45.
- [5.](#) For a short and very recent intellectual biography with illustrative images, see Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx* (London: Reaktion, 2012).
- [6.](#) For a vivid picture of local politics in Trier, see Sperber, *Karl Marx*, ch. 1.
- [7.](#) [*Rhenish Gazette*]
- [8.](#) [*German-French Annals*]
- [9.](#) See [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Communism/Socialism’.
- [10.](#) See [Chapter 5](#) ‘Capitalism and Revolution’.
- [11.](#) [*Die Heilige Familie ...*]; *CW* 4: 5–211; note that *CW* 4 lists this work as by ‘Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’, whereas the title page of the original volume shows the authors’ names with Engels first.
- [12.](#) A daring foray into the ‘social question’; see [Chapter 2](#) ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’.
- [13.](#) See [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Socialism/Communism’.
- [14.](#) *CW* 6: 72–4.
- [15.](#) [*German Gazette of Brussels*]

- [16.](#) [*Trier Gazette*]
- [17.](#) *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in *CW* 6: 105–212.
- [18.](#) [*Système des contradictions économiques, ou philosophie de la Misère*]
- [19.](#) See the enlightening discussion of the intellectual relationship between the young Marx and utopian socialists in David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ch. 5.
- [20.](#) [*Misère de la philosophie. Réponse à la philosophie de la misère de M. Proudhon*]
- [21.](#) *CW* 6: 73; emphasis in original.
- [22.](#) *CW* 6: 73–4; see the argument in William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 35–50, that Proudhon and Proudhonism was Marx's principal object of critical scrutiny and attack, including later political work in the IWMA and critical work on political economy in *Capital* (appearances notwithstanding); see also the detailed contextual studies in Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 175–248; and Alan Gilbert, *Marx's Politics: Communists and Citizens* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981), pp. 82–94.
- [23.](#) The precursor to modern economics; see [Chapter 2](#) 'Class Struggle and Class Compromise'.
- [24.](#) [*New Rhenish Gazette*].
- [25.](#) [*Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*].
- [26.](#) [*Vorwort*]; *LPW* 158–62; *CW* 29: 261–5.
- [27.](#) ['Karl Marx ...']; *CW* 16: 465–77.
- [28.](#) As opposed to the earlier biographical notice of 1847 discussed above.

- [29.](#) See the discussion in Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, pp. 41–2.
- [30.](#) See [Chapter 6](#) ‘Exploitation and Alienation’.
- [31.](#) But see my extensive use of these materials in [Chapter 2](#) ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’.
- [32.](#) [*Einleitung ...*]; *EPW* 57–70; *CW* 3: 175–87.
- [33.](#) [*Zur Judenfrage*]; *EPW* 28–56; *CW* 3: 146–74.
- [34.](#) *EPW* 71–96; *CW* 3: 229–346, where the now famous ‘theory of alienation’ is developed.
- [35.](#) *EPW* 119–81; *CW* 5: 19–539; achieving publication only in the 1920s and 1930s. For a two-volume historical and analytical study of this fabricated ‘book’ see Terrell Carver and Daniel Blank, *A Political History of the Editions of Marx and Engels's ‘German Ideology Manuscripts’* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and Terrell Carver and Daniel Blank, *Marx and Engels's ‘German Ideology’ Manuscripts: Presentation and Analysis of the ‘Feuerbach Chapter’* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- [36.](#) See Jürgen Rojahn, ‘The Emergence of a Theory: The Importance of Marx's Notebooks Exemplified in Those from 1844’, *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture and Society* 14:4 (2006): 29–46.
- [37.](#) [*Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*]; *LPW* 1–30; *CW* 6: 477–519; and Terrell Carver and James Farr (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to The Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). This text is treated below as central to ‘Marx-making’ in the 1870s.
- [38.](#) [*Discours sur libre échange*]; *CW* 6: 450–65.
- [39.](#) Though discussed here in the context of Marx's activism in [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Socialism/Communism’.
- [40.](#) *LPW* 162; *CW* 29: 264–5.
- [41.](#) Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin,

1993 [1973]); and see Marcello Musto (ed.), *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy after 150 Years* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010).

[42.](#) [*Einleitung*]; Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 81–111.

[43.](#) My own translation possibly gives this impression, but it was not then intended; see Karl Marx, *Texts on Method*, ed. and trans. Terrell Carver (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), pp. 46–87, and detailed commentary pp. 88–158.

[44.](#) *LPW* 162; *CW* 29: 265.

[45.](#) This section draws on material published in Terrell Carver, ‘The *Manifesto* in Marx's and Engels's Lifetimes’, in Carver and Farr (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to The Communist Manifesto*, pp. 68–72.

[46.](#) ‘The Civil War in France’, *LPW* 163–207; *CW* 22: 307–55; the text was an address to the proletarians of the world issued on behalf of the General Council of the IWMA; see Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 507–9, for a detailed account of Marx's notoriety.

[47.](#) Not that they did not have their political differences; see Hal Draper, *The Adventures of the Communist Manifesto* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Socialist History, 1994), pp. 36–8.

[48.](#) Draper, *Adventures*, pp. 48–52.

[49.](#) [*Vorwort*]; *CW* 23: 174–5.

[50.](#) Draper, *Adventures*, pp. 48–9.

[51.](#) [*Das Kapital ...*]; *CW* 35: 7–761.

[52.](#) *CW* 46: 356; *CW* 49: 7.

[53.](#) The second (1872) and third (1883) German editions of *Capital* added little of substance or presentation, compared with Marx's very hard work on the French version.

54. For a discussion of this view, see Terrell Carver, *Engels: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 5.
55. *CW* 24: 463–81.
56. [*Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft*]; *CW* 25: 5–309.
57. [*Socialisme: utopie et scientifique*]; *CW* 24: 281–325.
58. [*Der Ursprung der Familie ...*]; *CW* 26: 129–276.
59. [*Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie*]; *CW* 26: 353–98.
60. Franz Mehring (ed.), ‘Aus dem literarischen Nachlass von Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels und Ferdinand Lassalle’, in *Gesammelte Schriften von Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels 1841–1850*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: J. H. W. Dietz Nachfolger, 1902).

## 2

# Class Struggle and Class Compromise

Class is a very general idea,<sup>1</sup> so is struggle, and so is compromise. Ranks, orders and castes; hierarchies of authority, wealth and power; difference, argument and agreement – all these can be traced out in the earliest written and symbolic records that we have of human societies. And these are the basic concepts through which – by projection – we challenge ourselves to make sense of pre-historic societies that have left us only archaeological artefacts and remains.

The twenty-first century has witnessed notable revivals in struggles and conflictual events that reference the basic terms of modern social classes in industrialized and industrializing societies. And indeed these terms – class, struggle and compromise – are used to cover the tensions and disputes that occur among nations and between trading blocs on an international scale. It makes just as much sense to see countries rank-ordered by authority, wealth and power, as it does individuals within a country.

It is also important to note there are structures, collectivities and slogans in place to put our minds off this way of looking at inter-relationships, and to focus instead on citizenship, agreement and consensus. The UN General Assembly, for example, equalizes all member states through one state/one vote in the UN Charter, much as most national political systems equalize all citizens through constitutions that specify one person/one vote. Politicians are not short of ‘we’re all in it together’ sloganeering with regard to the economy, and it is the same with climate-change images and exhortation on a global scale. But beneath the veneer of equality-as-sameness (‘each counting for one and no more than one’; ‘all for one and one for all’ etc.), countries are different, and so are people.

Modern democratic regimes were founded on this tension between straightforward sameness (as in one-person/one-vote)<sup>2</sup> and differences of all kinds. Many of these differences are now statistical categories, including indices of social class and others that are

constantly surveyed by public and private agencies. And there are narratives, programmes and algorithms that either validate certain differences as fair and just, or alternatively promote equality in order to address injustice and unfairness. These equalization strategies often operate through equality procedures and transfer payments, e.g. 'fair and equal employment' or 'need-blind admissions', 'tax credits' or 'housing benefit'.

As a global process, democratization removes (to some degree) previously naturalized institutions and identities of authority, wealth and power. These hierarchies were typically managed by authoritarian states *and* religious authorities, whereas democratization redistributes authority, wealth and power more widely among the citizenry in various ways, such as public office, commercial markets and more nebulous gradations of social status. Democratization also tends to displace and marginalize religious distinctions and formal hierarchies, at least to a certain degree, while maintaining the respect that the secular must offer to the sacred in most polities. Given the preservation of *some* differences in authority, wealth and power – other than in extremist egalitarian regimes – there arises perforce a discourse of in/equality, and consequently a politics that – variously – justifies degrees of *both* equality and inequality through circumstantial and consequential arguments.

Since Roman times, at least, the role of money has been crucial to challenging established hierarchies of authority, particularly when they are defined in terms of status hierarchies by 'birth' (i.e. ancestry and clan), or in terms of practical control of wealth-creating resources, such as land and minerals, or in terms of simply 'pulling the levers' of power and getting away with it. Defining peculation and other forms of corruption in the first place, policing it in the second place and obtaining restitution in the third place, are huge issues of contemporary concern, nationally and internationally. Indeed with globalized financial systems, even 'crony capitalism', the distinction looks increasingly tenuous, but fraught, and regularly in the news. The interlocking character of democratic institutions with corporate wealth and power – but also resistance to this, up to reversal and revolution – are quite familiar political phenomena across the globe.



The ‘Panama papers’, first publicized on 3 April 2016, were leaked by an anonymous whistleblower who stated that his or her concern was with income inequality and large-scale injustice.<sup>3</sup> The use of shell companies, tax havens and off-shore accounting mechanisms is arguably unjust, even when such schemes fall on the right side of the line between tax avoidance (which is legal) and tax evasion (which is not). Similarly in pre-commercial times not everyone was necessarily happy with naturalized hierarchies of status, consumption and power, particularly when various degrees of servitude were defined and enforced, whether legally or informally. Many regarded such systems as not merely traditional but as sacred, and therefore justice incarnate, but many others complained and rebelled in large and small ways.

In modern commercial times, and particularly in twenty-first-century international politics, differences in authority, wealth and power – and the mutually reinforcing relationships between these three – are a distinctive and ‘nagging’ issue in relation to monetary holdings and access to wealth-creation, both for individuals and for nation-states. Much of the attention in these political debates, confrontations and protests is focused on ‘extremes’ of wealth and income, though exactly how notions of equality would justify some outcomes as ‘non-extreme’ and so acceptable – perhaps even beneficial – varies considerably, as do the kinds of arguments that could be used to recommend compulsory redistributions and other equalizing strategies moving difference towards sameness. *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*<sup>4</sup> is a good example of the genre of finding the overall ‘balance’ between inequalities of income, wealth and power, because the authors argue that improved collective outcomes at a national level can be shown to constitute a potent manifesto for redistributive policies and thus a warning to nations tolerating, or pursuing, inequalitarian outcomes. This egalitarian argument runs counter to a contrary argumentative strategy of validating differential individual outcomes on the basis of moralized principles of individual ownership rights and purely ‘procedural’ justice, set within a ‘free market’ framework of minimal governmental regulation and presupposing self-interested maximization of economic utilities.<sup>5</sup>



Naturalized orders of authority, wealth and power become so through hereditary transmission, whether by individual bequest, or – more usually – power-structures that are independent of individual choice, such as kinship systems and clan networks. The hereditary principle – operating through innumerable vagaries of kinship and kinship-like practices – has been a strong one with regard to power-holding, wealth-transmission and authority-relations of superior to inferior, and naturalizing these practices as tradition. Post-feudal conceptions of social class – as a cumulative effect of individualized behaviour in relation to ‘opportunity’ open to everyone – have abolished some of these hereditary principles and practices, but certainly not all of them; legislation proscribing nepotism and codes of practice to define this offence and other conflicts of interest are highly variable in design, as is enforcement.

The major legitimate structure of hereditary transmission still in place in most areas of the world is inheritance, not just of wealth, but of family connections, networks, even political power that descends through spouses and dynasties, sometimes validated in popular elections for leadership positions. The abolition of serfdom, and eventually chattel slavery, put the ‘inferior ranks’ of European and colonized American societies into commercial relationships, namely wage-labour and domestic un-waged labour, mediated through the hereditary, gender and family connections just described, which are those of inherited disadvantage. Class occupies exactly this nexus of commodified property in differential holdings and resources. Resources include human labour to be exchanged for wages as a factor of production, or alternatively the lack of any such holdings, including an inability to labour at all or to interact even minimally with market-relations, and then only on highly unfavourable terms.

Historians – and historians of historiography – can trace this story, in just these concepts, back to Roman times and to Roman historians, where rich and poor as classes in the city-state were objectified symbolically into ‘the Senate and the People of Rome’ and semiotically as ‘SPQR’. This history is a history of struggle, where struggle is a presupposition within what historians then and now have conceptualized as a ‘balancing’ set of constitutional arrangements. Of course as empire succeeded republic there were

more people – and more points of struggle – outside the traditional social ranks and political institutions of the bygone republican age. These Roman republican terms were revived in post-medieval/early modern Euro-American political thinking right through the American (1776) and French revolutions (1789). The latter's Constitution of 1793 launched the most direct attack of all on the hereditary principle in authority-relations by equalizing (male) suffrage universally. This Constitution of the Year I was soon suspended and was then superseded by the one of 1795, when property qualifications on the suffrage – hence heritable class privilege – were reintroduced, and equalizing controls on, and redistributions of, property in various forms were put aside.<sup>6</sup> It is not a huge leap from these constitutional and economic arrangements to the present.

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) designates a social movement and global network dating from the occupation of Zuccotti Park in the Lower Manhattan financial district of New York City on 17 September 2011. A 'Declaration of the Occupation of New York City',<sup>7</sup> dated 29 September, poses issues in similar terms to those discussed above. In particular the Declaration focuses on the acquisition by 'private' corporations in the USA ('artificial persons', in legal terminology) of rights formerly applicable only to 'natural persons', i.e. human individuals, an update on the (male) citizens of the eighteenth-century revolutions described above. It asserts the eighteenth-century doctrine of popular sovereignty, from which – and from which exclusively – legitimate government can arise.

The Declaration then details major injustices against 'the people' that have followed from governmental violations of, and disrespect for, their individual rights, together with corporate benefits that have followed from this dereliction and illegitimacy; the list is said to be 'not all-inclusive'. The listing of injustices focuses on economic inequalities of income, wealth and power enforced and exacerbated domestically through political, legal and extra-legal processes. It asserts that these processes have resulted in corruption and oppression, from which corporate 'Executives' have benefited at the expense of ordinary 'taxpayers'. It also connects these corporate and governmental activities with continuing colonialisms, thus invoking

an international class structure of nations, as well as sketching a class structure oppressing the vast majority of American individuals.

The occupation had precursors internationally in post-financial-crisis protests, and it generated similar movements and sentiments elsewhere in the USA and numerous other countries.<sup>8</sup> It was terminated on 29 November following court decisions, which determined in favour of corporate ‘private’ property rights, as opposed to individuals’ rights to use ‘public’ spaces. Unsurprisingly the courts did not engage with the substantive political issues involving inequalities of wealth, income and power, nor did they take up constitutional issues of governmental legitimacy, or the lack thereof.<sup>9</sup>

The immensely popular slogan ‘We are the 99%’ of the Occupy movement fits into a post-1776 pattern of popular protest against corrupt authoritarian or corrupted democratic political systems that permit – and in some cases protect and encourage – heritable transmission of authority through networking, ‘connections’ and wealth; through low or non-existent inheritance or wealth taxes; and through toleration of large-scale tax avoidance, corrupt acquisitions, ‘cover-ups’, ‘cosy’ arrangements involving tax officials and financial regulators, and the like. The manipulation of electorates by billionaires sometimes links wealth quite directly to power, and would-be millionaires to power-holding offices. President Donald Trump, who used inherited wealth to push his personal fortune into billions of dollars, is not a new phenomenon in the history of presidential regimes and democratic elections.<sup>10</sup> Nor are class-related protests and political campaigning – mirroring and invoking the Occupy agenda and Declaration – at all likely to cease, even in the face of repression and brutality.

## Marx Today

Marx is present – in all of the above phenomena and various histories – in two ways, even if no one is quoting him. It is a measure of his influence, and his presence, that no one needs to. Marxian thinking is simply part of the culture because it fits into the way we have thought about these matters since the eighteenth-century

revolutionary revival of classical thinking in terms of class, struggle and compromise. The two ways are these: first, Marx's summary of the above situation in relation to differential access to income, wealth and power is vivid, often snappy, quotable and ubiquitous, as I will show below; second, Marx's take on our predicaments is distinctive and provocative, though not necessarily in the way that commentators usually present it. As I explained in the previous chapter, academic framings of Marx and his 'thought', rather than contextually framed as politically minded activisms, have removed him a further step over and beyond the obvious chronological distance from the politics and issue-engagements of today.

The following discussion in this chapter will present what Marx was *doing*, not just thinking, when he wrote what he wrote, for the audiences that he had in mind. It will also consider what he said about his activities, and therefore about himself in correspondence and elsewhere, though, as with any self-advertisement, this will not be taken uncritically. And it will dip into the very lively, but neglected, archive store of Marx's journalism, not simply relying on his well-known pamphlets and his – relatively few – published books.

The organization of these materials will not be strictly chronological, since in relation to these rather abstract concepts – class, struggle and compromise – the discussion here will necessarily be thematic. However, I am resisting undue anachronism by taking activity to be a unifying principle, because I see Marx's activism as a unifying, and indeed self-generated perspective that makes his work hang together. Or rather hang together as much as it does, since I am also resisting the idea that his mind simply generated a set of ideas that became more consistently 'him' over time, which is a commonplace way of presenting his 'life and thought'.

While not a politician, Marx was highly political. His thinking, as reflected in his writing, is characteristically of the moment rather than always abstract. Even his most abstract passages of analysis arise from, and are interventions in, a political – rather than merely intellectual – struggle. These struggles are located within various constituent contexts and available media, involving institutions such as newspapers, pamphleteering presses, clandestine and semi-overt movements for social change, and thus shifting circles and coteries of

more or less like-minded associates. In short, Marx did not write for the ages from any kind of academic perspective as we understand it today. His presumed readership, which was always educated – or at least self-educated – would or should in his view take a dim view of such academic vocations and avocations as other-worldly and de-politicizing, whether self-serving or self-deluding.

## Class

Marx's journalism begins in 1842, and marks his debut as a published writer. These articles have not been much read since the time, and were probably not much read then, even in the immediate locality of the Rhineland. Scholarly interest has been extremely limited, confined mainly to bibliographical signposting on the road to supposedly more interesting things. What this usual focus on philosophizing misses is not so much the import of Marx's ideas in his early journalism, but the sense of what was going on in choosing to write that kind of piece for a local audience, getting it published in a still-censored and repressive environment and what the piece actually says. However, determining what any of these pieces actually says is less straightforward than it sounds, since to get past the censor, and doubtless some editorial colleagues, they were written in a somewhat coded way. This tactic was not just about the given situation, but about Marx's terms for making sense of it, and for making political sense of controversial circumstances for his audience, given that any politics at all was highly discouraged by the monarchical regimes.<sup>11</sup> Starting here with the early journalism is good preparation for a consideration of some of Marx's more famous texts and quotes in relation to class, and for seeing how concisely Marx fits himself into a tradition of egalitarian radicalism, in certain respects, and how sharply he challenges that very tradition, in others.

As historian Heinz Lubasz explains, in a landmark but sadly neglected article,<sup>12</sup> Marx's contacts in the *Rheinische Zeitung* editorial collective were worlds away from his former academic associates of student-days, radical in their thinking as they were. Their student radicalism was mostly on the nature of authority – both church and state – in relation to popular sovereignty, which was

then a banned doctrine redolent of the French revolutionary ‘Terror’, with its anti-hierarchical executions and mobilization of ‘the mob’ to positions of ‘rule’. The newspaper editorial collective, by contrast and rather less grandly, was interested in the ‘social question’, i.e. the problem of poverty and economic distress, and its relation to free trade and protective tariffs. Public comment in the press, as with comment in the Rhenish Diet or representative assembly – which was advisory, only, to the monarch, and only at his invitation – was confined to respectful suggestion for mild reform, with of course no obligation on the monarch to follow through. This stage setting is a familiar one: class, struggle and compromise, whether brokered at the monarch's behest, or at the behest of anti-monarchical groups and activists. Compromises were of course rather limited and one-sided under the circumstances.

Nonetheless in his articles Marx confronted the political philosophy of the Prussian society of ‘orders’ or ‘Estates of the Realm’ [*Stände*], a still-feudal structure of landlords and guilds to which people belonged as masters or servants, in various senses immune to monetary purchase – or not. If you belonged, and found yourself in poverty, recourse to sustenance was through your ‘estate of the realm’ as an entity consisting of mutual and legal obligations (supposedly). If you did not belong – and by the 1840s the ‘new poor’ were becoming half the population – then there was recourse only to ‘private’, generally religious charity (supposedly), since by definition beneficence was voluntary. As Marx wrote in one of his articles, the ‘*existence of the poor class itself* has ... not found an appropriate place in the conscious organization of the state’.<sup>13</sup> The ‘new poor’ were landless, jobless labourers, not finding a secure place in wage-labour, either in manual enterprises or in domestic service. Their plight evoked emotions of both pathos and fear in those with property, position and prospects. The liberals of the *Rheinische Zeitung* saw this as an economic and therefore a political problem – a novel view, for the time and place, and perforce a subversive one in the eyes of the authoritarian monarchical and religious powers-that-be.

Marx's ‘take’ on the situation was very much like that of Occupy. Society, for him, is a 100 per cent proposition of sameness in respect of essential (though adult male) humanity; it is not a graded system

of orders that fixes hierarchies of authority, wealth and power from birth, or at least makes any mobility – either up or down – deeply ‘unnatural’ and unlikely. This democratic position is essentially a mirror of universal (male) suffrage and empowerment, as in the French Constitution of the Year I, and couched in principled terms that would also validate political action, i.e. ‘the people’ are entitled to act politically outside the suffrage, if in extreme circumstances they need to. The relationship between this principle of sameness, i.e. one [male] person/one vote, and the degree of non-sameness among individuals in terms of economic positions and potentials, as discussed above, constitutes a further question. This was indeed the actual question that Marx went on to ask and to debate, and which was in fact the substance of the Occupy movement's confrontational activisms.

Marx's chosen issue in his article ‘On the Theft of Wood’<sup>14</sup> thus aligns with many concerns and views current within Occupy and with similar efflorescences of debate and struggle across the – now almost wholly – commodified globe. The proposal before the Rhenish Diet, for onward transmission to the Prussian king, as a suggestion, was to revoke key provisions of the feudal law of entitlement for ‘peasant’ farmers to gather firewood at will from the forest floor. Marx's argument – again a very current one now – was that, whatever the law, the proposed change was an inhuman act by a class that valued inanimate resources more than animate human beings. These human beings were already poor enough, and had no other recourse to daily necessities, so the article noted.

As Lubasz explains, Marx's view inverts the presumption that property and property-lessness are aspects of a natural order, and argues instead that human similarities in terms of needs and wants are what is natural. The implication is that social orders, ranks and hierarchies can be questioned: they either do or do not make lives livable, and all lives are equal in virtue of a ‘sameness’ in being human. Marx pursues this via a scandalous and ironic argument. He wrote that politicized invocations of tradition in relation to the fixed orders of humanity in the still-extant neo-feudal structure effectively construct a caste-system analogous to the differentiation in nature between different species of animals. This ‘animalistic’ social order in late feudalism thus fallaciously degrades some humans in relation to



others, and Marx draws the conclusion that ‘the privileged classes’ base their political claims not on the ‘human content of right’ but – shockingly – on its ‘animal form’:

*Feudalism* ... the world of divided mankind ... is nothing but a refracted form of equality. In the countries of naïve feudalism ... where in the literal sense of the word people are put in separate caste-boxes [like animal species], and the noble, freely interchanging members of the great sacred body of humanity ... are forcibly torn apart ... [so] under feudalism one species feeds at the expense of another, right down to the species which ... grows on the ground and has only numerous arms with which to pluck the fruits of the earth [i.e. working-class people] for higher races [i.e. propertied and privileged people] while it itself eats dust; whereas in the natural animal kingdom the worker bees kill the drones, in the spiritual [i.e. political] animal kingdom [of modern humanity] the drones kill the worker bees, and precisely by labour.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, Marx argued that rights of expression – as well as to life – are universally applicable to all, and are not naturally assigned to some rather than to others, or to some more than others. In a spirited set of polemics both against a censorious government ban on another newspaper, and against further newspapers who aligned themselves with the government's idea of the ‘good’ press, Marx defended freedom of the press in principle and in practice as ‘the political spirit of the people’ representing both ‘the moral spirit’ and the ‘thorns’ (i.e. sometimes unpleasant opinions) of the present.<sup>16</sup> And rather more specifically in relation to his next *exposé*:

Thus, with a lively press movement, the whole truth will be revealed, for if the whole appears at first only as the emergence of a number of different, individual points of view which – sometimes intentionally, sometimes accidentally – develop side by side, in the end, however ... by means of a division of labour, the press arrives at the whole truth, not by one person doing everything, but by many doing a little.<sup>17</sup>

Occupy supporters reflected even more precisely the situation that Marx confronted in his next article, which defended in no uncertain terms a newspaper correspondent who had taken up the immiseration of grape vine-growers in the Mosel Valley.<sup>18</sup> Having



prospered in boom-years of production and sales in the 1820s, the growers – smallholders and wage-workers – were bankrupted and out of work during a period of ‘bust’ in the 1830s. Marx's reasoning about the situation – astonishing for the time – denaturalized both market relations and the hands-off attitude of the Prussian state: ‘The ruin of the poor vine-growers is regarded as a kind of natural phenomenon, to which one must be resigned in advance, seeking only to mitigate the inevitable.’<sup>19</sup> Marx's argument was simply that both markets and states are human creations, and that, as such, things made by humans could be changed by humans. What was currently negating any change was the way that governments and their bureaucracies substituted generalities for objective specifics (e.g. mass economic distress) and treated even collective protests as the mere will of private individuals (with no public standing):

In investigating a situation *concerning the state* one is all too easily tempted to overlook the *objective nature of the circumstances* and to explain everything by the *will* of the persons concerned. However, there are *circumstances* which determine the actions of private persons and individual [public] authorities, and which are as independent of them as the method of breathing.<sup>20</sup>

But markets and states would change, as indeed would the relationship between the two, only if there was a popular will to change the conditions through which these very particular human sufferings could arise, and obviously would continue to arise. The traditional, default position of the government was merely to alleviate suffering, through voluntary actions of charitable agencies and individuals, as if nothing else could be done. Marx argued that the state bureaucracy – conceived by him as a realm of abstract generalities misprising particular circumstances – would have no interest in undoing its investment in the ‘natural’ order of property relations, and arrived at this conclusion:

The Mosel inhabitant, therefore, demands that, if he carries out the work which nature and custom have ordained for him, the state should create conditions for him in which he can grow, prosper, and live.<sup>21</sup>

Marx's hope that the citizenry at large could rethink the relationship between private interest and public good rested on the education that a free press could undertake, if it were allowed to, much as Occupiers attempted to effect a 're-think' through the means of digital social media, conventional press reporting and of course on-site debates, assemblies and classes. In the former case Marx's (probably rather faint) hopes were dashed when his paper was assaulted with censorship orders and had to close. In the latter case Occupy rode a wave of public interest that still ripples, but seems to have had few long-term legislative or administrative effects, other than a potent afterlife in the annals of public activism.

The ideologies through which 'the market' has been naturalized as a mechanism that is not to be tampered with have vastly increased since Marx's time. For example:

Today, we live in the most prosperous time in human history. Poverty, sicknesses, and ignorance are receding throughout the world, due in large part to the advance of economic freedom. In 2017, the principles of economic freedom that have fueled this monumental progress are once again measured in the Index of Economic Freedom, an annual guide published by The Heritage Foundation, Washington's No. 1 think tank.<sup>[22](#)</sup>

But the banners and tweets protesting at the supsize shares in income, wealth and power enjoyed and defended by the one per cent are somewhat less focused than Marx's arguments, which were, rather unfortunately, wrapped up in the coded and convoluted prose of the censored media of the time. And again the ideological alignments and symbolic discourses have shifted. Some Occupy supporters referenced Marx and quoted from his recurrently popular texts, but on the whole supporters avoided stirring up the 'Red scare' that allegations of Marxism would provoke.<sup>[23](#)</sup>

Marx's appeal in 1842–3 was anyway to logic, fact and commonalities of moral experience – all without an 'ism', avoiding any invocation of the proscribed and foreign 'Rights of Man and the Citizen' dating from the French Revolution.<sup>[24](#)</sup> Occupy supporters, fortunately for them, had the benefit of the US Bill of Rights and a judiciary that largely respects those principles, in particular 'equal

protection of the laws'.<sup>25</sup> Marx's protests to the king of Prussia on this point – that the *Rheinische Zeitung* should continue in print as a protected space for democratic dialogue between people and state – went unregarded.<sup>26</sup> Marx's perorations are quite Occupy-like in their succinct directness: '... the human being ought to have been victorious over the forest owner'.<sup>27</sup> And speaking of the idealized press in relation to the economically distressed vine-growers he writes: 'The attitude of the press to the people's conditions of life is based on *reason*, but it is equally based on feeling. Hence it does not speak only in the clever language of judgement that transcends circumstances, but the passionate language of circumstances themselves ....'<sup>28</sup>

While there is almost no commentator-interest in these pieces – or if so, only very cursorily – Marx himself cites them specifically in his autobiographical published Preface of 1859 as defining for the origin and development of his activism and writing:

... a few remarks concerning the course of my own politico-economic studies would appear to be in order ... It was during the years 1842–43 as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* that I first encountered the embarrassment of having to discuss so-called material interests. The debates of the Rhineland Assembly [Rhenish Diet] concerning wood-gathering rights in forests and land sales on country estates, the official polemic ... initiated with the *Rheinische Zeitung* concerning the circumstances of the Mosel peasantry ... provided the first occasions to pursue economic questions.<sup>29</sup>

And Engels reported similarly many years later:

Marx always used to tell me that it was precisely his preoccupation with the law on thefts of wood and the condition of the Mosel wine-growers that led him from politics pure and simple to economic conditions and thus to socialism.<sup>30</sup>

## Struggle

Class was not a novel idea in Marx's time, nor was the existence of classes in history – or class-like structures of inherited power and

privilege down through the ages – at all novel either. ‘The poor you will always have with you’ was an often quoted and easily accepted truism,<sup>31</sup> as was the view that against the odds occasional individuals could rise in status and/or wealth, or fall into oblivion and/or poverty, though only as a consequence of divine intervention, or – rather similarly – high-ranking eccentricities or ‘preferments’. The idea that a very different social structure and political formation could regularize this kind of movement – and thus overturn to some degree the advantages or disadvantages of ‘birth’ – burst out in the French Revolution (colonial Americans had no locally based hereditary aristocracies and monarchies of European origin to deal with). Authoritarians and democratizers alike have been struggling with these laws, practices, traditions, institutions, shibboleths and taboos ever since.

One text by Marx and Engels in particular says more about this situation, which is also ours today, than any other text by either writer, and also says it very accessibly.<sup>32</sup> That text is of course the source of a defining quotation, which has come to signify Marx's outlook [*Ansicht*] or conception [*Auffassung*] as an apothegm or pithy truth:<sup>33</sup> ‘The history of all society up to now is the history of class struggles.’

However, in the context of Marx and Engels's politicking of mid to late 1847, this was the opening line rhetorically,<sup>34</sup> informing an audience of democratizing radicals just how they should think about their societies, their families and associates, and also themselves, so as to see the point of *acting* (i.e. *making* history), to agree the goals, and to learn what kind of actions to take and not to take. The document is programmatic about thinking and acting, rather than constitutional about institutions in general or rules for the Communist Party (which was never really on the cards – ‘Party’ seems to have designated a loose association of like-minded risk-takers). Rhetorically, then, the text rewrites history, and thus performs a critique,<sup>35</sup> without giving the traditional, opposing historiographies much exposure. Its boldness works against nuance and qualification, which also distinguishes it from *ad hominem* polemic, which would be ‘of the day’, and from today's academic

writing, which would promote some ‘balanced’ or at least respectful engagement with alternative views.

What emerges from this short sentence and the ensuing explication – largely unremarked until the 1870s<sup>36</sup> – is not anything particularly fresh about class. Nor is the idea of struggle unfamiliar; there were any number of more or less familiar revolts and riots, rebellions and tumults to recall. What is fresh here is the idea that the struggle, in our ‘epoch’, as the text recounts, is worthwhile, and that this struggle is not confined to the outbursts that historians record, almost inevitably, as failures. Rather the struggle that Marx and Engels identify at any time is a ‘more or less hidden civil war’, so the struggle is therefore already on-going for readers, who do not have to start from scratch, but who are already involved in it, like it or not.

The substantial sections I and II of the *Manifesto* then explain how and why the class structures of industrializing societies, as opposed to traditional societies of ‘orders’ or ‘estates of the realm’, are going to be different. It does this by appealing to differences that are visible already in some locales as illustrative and then by drawing hortatory conclusions to spur readers to action. Therefore what the text is *not* doing, rhetorically, is working to satisfy descriptive criteria so as to be ‘accurate’. Marx and Engels's rhetorical argument here is a simple binary one, which follows – not from a sociological survey or political poll – but from a logic of action. That logic is one of ‘are you for or against ...?’ where opposing sides are presented as divided by something quite specific, namely class identification.

Given that historically there have been classes, and that they have struggled, and that orders and ranks of wealth, privilege and property have survived in one form or another, the communist rhetoric in the *Manifesto* must point to something quite different in order to distinguish communists sharply from competitors, and thus paint these rivals as poorly informed. What is different, so the text explains, is the hugely productive power of modern industry: products will swamp markets, and thus require buyers with ready-money; buyers *en masse* will need money as wages, rather than to work for subsistence-goods on the land.

The text of the *Manifesto* develops this over-production/under-consumption logic – not uncommon in the political economy of day

– as a *political* opportunity, and urges its audience to resolve the contradiction and thus avert further crises.<sup>37</sup> Resolution must come from the workers’ end of the social spectrum, so the text surmises, though there are specific overtures going out to others in the higher ranks of society. Such persons might arrive at this realization and join with the workers, as Marx and Engels suggest. Thus the struggle is evidently on-going, and best conceptualized as lower classes versus higher ones. But Marx and Engels have added the twist that in an industrializing age of high-productivity and surplus production, the (new) working-classes have – or will have – a numerical advantage over all the other classes. Given that industrialized wage-workers outnumber – or will outnumber – those higher up the scale of income, wealth and power, and that agricultural labour and craft manufacture will eventually decline in the face of mechanization, it follows, so they explain, that democratic decision-making must run counter to existing hierarchies of institutionalized wealth and – as was most often the case in their day – entrenched hereditary political power.

As Marx and Engels wrote in their short Preface to the ‘feature’ edition of the *Manifesto* in 1872, the rhetorical force of this tract had somewhat evaporated after twenty-five years, drawing the implication that the simplifying logics of the text would not entirely make sense. Yet they also appealed to enduring principles stated – somewhere – in the text, though they declined to say what exactly these were. And they certainly declined to rework the principles into a new *Manifesto*, though it is unclear exactly why not.<sup>38</sup> Advancing age is usually cited as an explanation, yet the two were certainly involved in a more elaborate but still somewhat similar international organization, the IWMA.<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, Marx himself, in correspondence, identified class struggle specifically – in relation to modern industrial productivity – as something distinctive about his writing and activism of which he was proud:



Now as for myself, I do not claim to have discovered either the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me, bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this struggle between the classes ... My own contribution was ... to show that the existence of classes is merely bound up with certain historical phases in the development of production ...<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, in later years Engels treated the 1848 *Manifesto* as a work that needed updating, but with qualifying footnotes in his academic manner. This is indicative of its later reception – and the posthumous reception of Marx's writing generally – as a matter for 'scientific' or 'philosophical' scrutiny and debate.<sup>41</sup> That approach, of course, sets the rhetorical force of the text at least somewhat aside: one simply learns truths abstracted somewhat from action, rather than absorbing a rhetoric composed to *promote* action. In his footnote of 1888 Engels was clearly reading the text, at least in part, as containing propositions that should and would be evaluated with respect to their descriptive truth, rather than rhetorical force. The English text read: 'The history of all hitherto existing society\*\* is the history of class struggles.' Engels's double asterisk [\*\*] footnoted the amendment: 'That is, all *written* history. In 1847, the pre-history of society, the social organization existing previous to recorded history, was all but unknown.'<sup>42</sup> However, the previous single asterisk [\*] footnoted an amendment by Engels that was rather more in tune with a rhetorical updating of the text:

By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern Capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage-labour. By proletariat, the class of modern wage-labourers, who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour-power in order to live.<sup>43</sup>

In 1847 'bourgeoisie' and 'proletariat' were loan-words from French radicalism into German where they no doubt 'buzzed' for the audience, inducting them into a fresh, economic way of looking at social hierarchies. Rhetorically this signalled progress to Marx and Engels's readers, not least because of self-confessed German 'backwardness' in relation to France, and because repetition of German commonplace expressions would not promote the stark

contrast between modern industrial production and concomitant social structures. In Marx and Engels's view the vocabulary of *Bürgerthum* and *Arbeiterklasse*, or in the latter case, the more likely usage *Pöbel* (rabble), was reactionary and unchallenging.<sup>44</sup>

Marx and Engels's rhetorical call to working-class action against economic oppression, to democratizing politics against authoritarianism, and to a definitive resolution of the 'social question' by means of modern industry, has been underplayed – and undermined – by reading strategies that reduce their *Manifesto* argument to conclusions. Presented then as descriptive statements, commentators have de-politicized the meanings in the text, since the original rhetorical force is displaced into empirical judgements of fact. The claim in the text that modern industries simplify and intensify class struggles is undoubtedly reductive, but it is nonetheless more in the service of a rhetoric-of-action than of a sociological or economic generalization, then or now. A descriptive disquisition of the debateable nuances of social classification systems, and an academic, definitional enquiry into what class actually is, would have a similar effect. Unsurprisingly in later manuscript drafts for his vast study of capitalism, Marx's definitional comments on 'class' as such simply peter out, thus frustrating many of his academic followers.<sup>45</sup> In that way much of the distinctiveness of Marx's conceptualizations at this level has dissolved, whether or not one is moved to action by the rhetorical force of the writing and the logic of action it works hard to perform.<sup>46</sup>

Typically since the turn of the twentieth century, and thus decades after his death, Marx's views on class have been abstracted from his activist texts (such as were available), and his rhetorical politics-making has been condensed into descriptive schemata and empirical propositions. Thus Marx comes to have an academically robust general model of class (derived from similarly abstracted comments on human social production), a view of struggle as in some way inherently necessary to history, and exemplars of concrete analysis, gesturing towards the complexities that develop in explanatory accounts of particular case-studies.<sup>47</sup> More specifically he is said to have outlined a 'structural presentation' of classes, defining them from a 'material basis' such that 'objectively divergent' interests



‘cause’ exploitation and thus ‘class antagonisms’. Class ‘formation’ and class ‘consciousness’ are then defined as ‘subjective’ phenomena, arising from individual perceptions, and politics must necessarily be directed to demonstrating the ‘best interests’ of a class in order to undermine ‘incorrect’ information derived from ‘ideology’, bourgeois or otherwise. This parsing of Marx's works, focusing on particular sentences in the *Manifesto*, thus sets up ‘research areas’ such that social scientific results – if done properly – will mirror current objectivities and subjectivities at a given social conjuncture.<sup>48</sup> How accurate such accounts are *judged to be*, rather than of what political use rhetorics of class struggle *could actually be*, completes a narrative shift from activism to academics, or – putting it another way – this social scientific reframing creates epistemological puzzles and empirical tests prior to any practical political actions anyone might be considering.

The prefatory lines to the *Manifesto* were remarkably prescient in terms of what happened to Marx's activism, and thus to the ideas that were rhetorically crafted to produce social change driven ‘from below’. Those lines introduce the text as an intellectual but popular *exposé*, loudly proclaiming truths that have been obscured by falsehoods and fantasies. These latter are smears and slanders, a ‘Red scare’ provoking a witch-hunt [*Heztjagd*]. This, of course, was much to the advantage of a motley collection of authoritarians, reactionaries and less ‘progressive’ political forces – less ‘progressive’ than the communism that the *Manifesto* proclaims, explains and clarifies. Rhetorically – and reductively – the text sets the truths of, and truths about, communism up against the ‘spectre’ of communism – a false and frightening apparition – through which the ‘powers that be’ aim to neutralize and then destroy the real thing.<sup>49</sup>

The ‘Red scare’ came to haunt Marx personally in the communist trials of the early 1850s in Cologne, as well as in later years when it functioned to demonize his activism and similarly to persecute adherents to almost any political programme for radical change. For Marx the terms of radical change were always loosely and locally defined within a conception of struggle for popular sovereignty, but focusing strategically on oppositional classes within that struggle. The unifying principles and strategies detailed in the *Manifesto* are

in general the ones that would unify sub-classes into classes that oppose each other, rather than presumptions or assertions of inclusivity and sameness that construct a singular and common 'society'. Such a consensus term would obviously marginalize, deny or negate the particular angle on modern industrial productivity and maldistribution of income, wealth and power that the *Manifesto* was at pains to explain. Thus Marx and Engels aimed to dispel the 'spectre' of communism that 'stalks the land of Europe'.<sup>50</sup>

However, the 'Red scare' worked against Marx and Engels in their lifetimes, and it works politically right through to the present day, haunting the Occupy protestors, even if their knowledge of what 'Red' might mean was possibly non-existent.<sup>51</sup> With such evident demonization, there is obviously little incentive to explore any 'dangerous' ideas, particularly when activism requires focus, and struggle is on-going. But then class and struggle surfaced together in these protests, and, as explained above, Marx has a clear signature here in inspirational thinking and democratic activism, even if that signature is not in quite the conceptual form through which – academically and popularly – his 'thought' has been parsed and paraphrased.<sup>52</sup>

## Compromise

Within the liberal democratic framings that have developed since Marx's time, compromise has become a virtue, indeed a distinctive and over-riding one. From John Stuart Mill (1806–73) to Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) to John Rawls (1921–2002) liberals have presented themselves in opposition to dogmatism, extremism, fanaticism, totalitarianism, dictatorship and the like. Of course just wars, whether foreign, world or civil are understood to constitute exceptional spaces where compromise is not appropriate. There have, however, been moments of ambiguity and wrongfootedness, notably the appeasement strategies of 1935–9, when the principle itself was somewhat discredited.

Compromise, however, has since regained its status as a liberal principle, though it has not always worked in favour of liberal policies. The US Constitution was notably founded on a series of

brokered compromises and overtly defended as such up to and well beyond the Civil War. However, it was liberalized out of some of those compromises, notably with slavery and racism, ultimately through Supreme Court judgments of the 1950s and later, rather than solely through representative institutions. Liberal policies enacted through civil-rights legislation were achieved more by ‘cloture’, a congressional procedure that ends compromise bargaining, than by compromise carried to a point of consensus. Outside of ‘security threats’ this ‘willingness to compromise’ has been more of a liberal model than the French revolutionary episodes in which extremisms of various sorts jockeyed for position, and liberal compromisers were very often also-rans.

These framings mesh nicely with the ‘Red scare’ tactics mentioned at the opening of the *Manifesto* and discussed above. The simplifying and reductive rhetoric-of-action of that text, and indeed Marx's consistently similar tone throughout his published work, have provided any number of suitable quotations, anecdotes and character-studies that have constructed him, his ideas and activities, and almost anything connected with him, as terrifying. This political imagery achieved international status in the 1890s and during the early years of the twentieth century, notably in ‘Allied’ (i.e. combined British and French) anti-Bolshevik military interventions in post-revolutionary Russia between 1918 and 1920. After the Second World War this portrait of Marx gained academic status in various guises as Cold War liberals posited links between contemporary totalitarianisms, self-described as communist, and Marx's ‘thought’, as put together and understood in this framing.<sup>53</sup> Once the ‘Red scares’ had at least somewhat subsided, Marx then became available to readers as something other than a ‘Red Terror Doctor’<sup>54</sup> or suitable subject for a ‘Study in Fanaticism’.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless it is still rare to find anyone interested in exploring Marx's ‘life and thought’ for any trace of compromise as a strategy, as opposed to a grudging and temporary acceptance of some particular setback. Instead ‘compromise’ serves as a marker separating liberals from Marx almost by definition, whereas in his own time this imputed sharp and doctrinal division made no sense at all.

However, it should be obvious that in the early 1840s Marx's advocacy of a distinctively industrial working-class project within a broad coalition of democratizing forces registered not just a minoritarian position, but a position claiming to represent the interests of a distinctly small minority in every country that Marx, Engels and their associates were keen to address. Thus it follows that Marx's activism had to track other class interests, and personalities in politics other than socialist or communist radicals, who were then very few in number anywhere. There were then no genuinely public personalities in working-class politics anyway, other than suspected criminal agitators and treasonous rebels.

An examination of the historical record, even in outline, shows that this is how Marx worked. Indeed, in relation to his associates, only he and Engels were economic radicals in a worldly and modern way, as opposed to utopian romanticists and small-scale colonists. Virtually the only people the two could work with were middle-class liberals/revolutionaries. Some of these people were involved – as Marx had been when editing the *Rheinische Zeitung* – with ‘progressive’ business and commercial interests that were opposed – discreetly – to monarchical authoritarianism and aristocratic privilege. While Marx had a reputation – whether accurately founded or not – for uncompromising rhetorics and assertive personal manners, there must have been some compromises along the line, otherwise he would not have been so obviously ‘in the thick of it’ with democratizing forces in Paris and Brussels, and later on during the revolutionary events of 1848–9, as well as in the London years of exile and IWMA activism.<sup>56</sup>

The characteristic Marxian political strategy was to join in with democratizing forces in correspondence committees or similar ‘friendly’ societies – discussion/community-singing/social-dining groups – which were activities of the sort that middle-class persons, precisely because of their class, could just about get away with, even though police surveillance was active. Notably Marx and his family were variously arrested and deported from their residences in Paris and Brussels during the 1840s, simply because of these involvements, and not particularly because of their foreignness or non-citizen status. Since Marx had a mission – to promote a modernist, economic and class-struggle oriented perspective – his

compromises with less radical individuals and groups were no doubt minimal and 'under the radar'. And it is certainly true that he and Engels connived at tactics to get themselves and their distinctively 'economic' position publicized and adopted.<sup>57</sup> But then that is what a political organization is and that is the way it will work, not least in freely associated parties and pressure groups, unless intimidation and repression intervene decisively.

The records of the time, so far as we have them, are further filtered by conditions of censorship and the need for coded language in print, and by considerations of audience and quotidian circumstances, which are often lost to us, or nearly unintelligible, given contextual differences between then and now. Nonetheless a brief look at Marx's activism and thinking in 1840s Brussels – where political repression was somewhat lax – will illustrate a mode of action that Marx himself – never mind his commentators – was less than happy to highlight. And we should remember that at the time, compromise was not the virtue that it has since become, given that between his time and ours authoritarians have in many places been pushed into retreat or ignominy, and the more-or-less liberal-minded among us need only concentrate on compromising with each other – or at least there have been periods when this was true. In the 1840s liberals/revolutionaries did not have that luxury, and Marx had the necessity of compromising his radical conclusions – at least a bit – with their more reformist projects, given their numbers and influence, and his notable lack of either.

At one extreme of compromise we have Marx's letter of 22 March 1845 – a follow-up to his petition for residence of 7 February addressed to King Leopold – agreeing 'to pledge myself, on my word of honour, not to publish in Belgium any work on current politics'.<sup>58</sup> Given the difficulties – financial, censorship, repression – connected with publishing any such work, perhaps this is not as big a compromise – or pretended compromise – as it seems.

Writing to Marx in Paris a month earlier – from his hated hometown of Barmen – Engels gives the flavour of compromising cooperation: 'You should write an article every 4 to 6 weeks for it [the Paris-based *émigré* newspaper *Vorwärts!*]<sup>59</sup> and not allow yourself to be 'governed' by your moods. Why doesn't [Mikhail] Bakunin [1814–76]



write anything, and why can't [August] Ewerbeck [1816–60] be induced to write at least something humdrum?'<sup>60</sup>

Most of Marx's letters from this period have been lost. Engels's letters to Marx give a vivid picture of a compromising coalitional politics on the ground, in this case in his native locale prior to his departure for Paris. There he could turn his attention to workers, German *émigrés*, who were numerous in newly industrializing districts. Even discounting Engels's enthusiasm for his cause (and for himself) this picture of middle-class politicking in the twin towns of Barmen and Elberfeld is unlikely to have been entirely fictional:

Yesterday we held our third communist meeting in the town's largest hall and leading inn. The first meeting was forty strong, the second 130 and the third at least 200. All Elberfeld and Barmen, from the financial aristocracy to *épicerie*, was represented, only the proletariat being excluded [presumably by social convention and political circumspection].<sup>61</sup>

Engels then notes on 25 February: 'Yesterday evening we got news that our next meeting was to be broken up by gendarmes and the speakers arrested.'<sup>62</sup> On the 26th and in the same letter: 'We have now of course given it [i.e. a further meeting] up.' And further in a more high-profile way, but one certainly indicative of a strategy of compromise-coalitions, Engels reprises a (now lost) correspondence between himself and Marx, on the one hand, and the 'progressive' philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), on the other:

... I received a letter from Feuerbach ... [who] maintains that until he has thoroughly demolished the religious piffle, he cannot concern himself with communism to the extent of supporting it in print ... However, he says he's a communist and that his only problem is how to practise communism. There's a possibility of his visiting the Rhineland this summer, in which case he must come to Brussels and we'll soon show him how.<sup>63</sup>

Had Marx objected to these activities and plans his negative reaction would certainly register in Engels's letters, and we see none of that. Indeed, as mentioned above, we have ample evidence of Marx pursuing the same strategies once he was settled in Brussels.<sup>64</sup>

Marx's letter to Proudhon of 5 May 1846, inviting the distinguished French socialist writer and political activist to join an international correspondence committee, was something of a cold call – the two were not acquainted, and Proudhon failed to reply. But Marx describes an eclectic project, including Engels and their Belgian associate Philippe Gigot (1819–60) by name, which represents compromise, rather than abjuring it:

The chief aim of our correspondence, however, will be to put the German socialists in touch with the French and English socialists; to keep foreigners constantly informed of the socialist movements that occur in Germany and to inform the Germans in Germany of the progress of socialism in France and England. In this way ideas and impartial criticism can take place ... And when the moment for action comes, it will clearly be much to everyone's advantage to be acquainted with the state of affairs abroad as well as at home.<sup>65</sup>

Compromise, however, was not an uncritical practice, by any means. Marx added a further postscript denouncing 'Mr [Karl] Grün of Paris' as 'nothing more than a literary swindler, a species of charlatan, who seeks to traffic in modern ideas', accusing him – in Grün's recently published German-language study *Social Movements in France and Belgium* – of patronizing Proudhon both as a German and as an intellectual.<sup>66</sup>

The *Manifesto* advocates compromise within and between classes as a strategic position, which makes more sense than the later liberal view that compromise is (almost always?) a virtue in itself. Rhetorically the text describes a proletariat, disunited through competition (other factors could have been added), and that was fighting, or at least positioned to fight 'the enemies of its enemies': monarchists, landowners, non-industrial bourgeoisie, small traders. The *Manifesto* does not proclaim this blatant compromise (fighting alongside an ultimate enemy), but rather the text observes the bourgeoisie appealing to the proletariat, enlisting its aid, drawing it into political action. While the sting in the tail is that the bourgeoisie is thus producing 'its own gravediggers', the dynamic is that of class compromise, of the poorly resourced with their immediate exploiters. And it works the other way round in the *Manifesto*: the twin dynamics of *déclassé* ruin and intellectual enlightenment will

drive middle-class compromise with property-less proletarians. This explication follows the political logic of the text, rather than the reduction of its argument to a singular and counterfactually inaccurate, if rhetorically powerful, conclusion that proletarian victory is ‘unavoidable’.<sup>67</sup>

Most studies of Marx's ‘life and thought’ emphasize the ‘failed’ nature of these compromise arrangements, noting the harshness of the exclusionary comments that Marx and Engels sometimes make, and their repeated recourse to newer associates and correspondents. This reduction, however, begs the question of compromise – and indeed the necessity for a large element of this – in the first place, even if it is pursued critically. Indeed it is inconceivable that Marx could have thought in any other terms. He cooperated substantially with the Engels–Moses Hess project to translate into German works by Charles Fourier (1772–1837) and to produce a collection of similarly utopian socialist pieces by French authors.<sup>68</sup> Rather than downgrade this episode (almost nothing was actually collected for the press) in the light of the critical ‘take’ on these literatures in section III of the *Manifesto* (where the rhetoric was overtly one of communist distinctiveness, since that was the point of the work), it is perhaps truer to Marx's political activism – and concomitant political thinking<sup>69</sup> – to rehabilitate the episodes of cross-class, cross-national and cross-ideological coalition-building.

Still, there can be non-compromises within compromise. Engels later suggested that the translation of Fourier's writings should omit ‘of course, the cosmogonic nonsense’ in notorious flights of fancy.<sup>70</sup> In a sense their strategy – given the repression, intimidation and hostility of all the governments involved – was: if there is no democracy, then there is no socialism, and if there is no socialism, then there is no communism. On their French revolutionary model, democracy would arrive on the streets and not occur by conspiracy, assassination or usurpation. As indeed it did in various institutionally limited and somewhat ephemeral forms from Brussels to Budapest in 1848–9. After that period of upheaval an uncompromising authoritarianism returned as hereditary rulers regained their thrones and palaces, and denounced the principles of popular sovereignty. But the revolutionary point had been made, and



constitutionalism as a reform began to make (very limited) inroads in European politics in subsequent decades.

## Back to the Future

The economic crisis of 1857–8 is generally regarded as the first global ‘meltdown’. While financial panics, bubbles and crashes had already featured in Europe from the early eighteenth century, this particular crisis emerged in the USA and involved European economies that had become – chiefly via imperialism – more globally extensive and financially interlinked than ever. Marx and Engels were considerably excited by the revolutionary possibilities that they thought they could see as circumstances unfolded: ‘... the cry of class was raised among the workers at every meeting in America!’ Marx wrote to Engels.<sup>71</sup> But they were, of course, far removed from that scene of action, and locally in Britain had less to celebrate.

Engels's line on compromise was interestingly analytical. Both were following Ernest Jones's (1819–69) attempt in the mid 1850s to revive the Chartist movement as a broad-based campaign for democratization, given that the ‘Great Reform Bill’ of 1832 had barely extended the suffrage at all. The historic Chartist demands had originated in the later 1830s and had run aground on the anti-revolutionary panics and proto-Red scares of 1848–9. The demands comprised: universal (male) suffrage, annual parliaments, secret ballots, equal constituencies, abolition of property qualifications for parliamentary candidates and salaries for MPs (so that privately held wealth would no longer be a prerequisite for the public position).<sup>72</sup> Most of these demands align within the terms, or at least the democratizing spirit, of the demands for ‘advanced countries’ listed at the close of section II of the *Manifesto*, though notably those demands included various economic measures relating to property, labour, education and nationalization. This economic angle was distinctive to the communist ‘take’ on modern industrializing societies.

Marx's view of Jones's proposal for a grand coalition conference at this time was that Jones was engineering a ‘deal’ whereby workers

should compromise with the bourgeoisie. They should do this by reducing the traditional demands for better wages and working conditions to just one – manhood suffrage – rather than by ‘forming a party’, agitating in the manufacturing districts and forcing ‘bourgeois’ politicians to compromise with *them*.<sup>73</sup> This nicely illustrates the point – which liberal democrats generally see the other way round – that it is not always the underdogs who are necessarily obligated (or forced) to make compromises, provided that the politics would work out effectively. After the episode was over, Marx summarized:

Despite my repeated warnings, and although I had predicted exactly what would happen – namely that he [Jones] would ruin himself and disorganize the Chartist Party – he took the course of trying to come to terms with the bourgeois radicals. He is now a ruined man ....<sup>74</sup>

My argument here is that there is more compromise in Marx's activism than he generally gets credit for, and more realistic political dynamics in his texts than his easily quoted supposed conclusions and sarcastic perorations would suggest. The Occupy movement does not seem to have got to the stage of intra-movement compromise such that programmatic demands could be brokered through effective compromise, one way or another, and coalitions consequently energized to take matters further politically, one way or another. To a very limited extent Marx and Engels had that strategy going in the 1840s, when they had associates and were in touch – to a degree – with some elements of mass movement activism and fast-moving events, many of them spontaneous outbursts of discontent involving violence and insurrection.

From their correspondence of 1857–8, though, we can tell that Marx and Engels at that time lacked this context of immediate popular activism, which was not actually much extant in the later 1850s in the Euro-American geographical zone – even in a loosely ‘organized’ Occupy mode. And both Marx and Engels, as foreigners in Britain on sufferance, were not in a position to exercise much political agency, which would attract police attention. Moreover, Marx's poverty-stricken family circumstances – and Engels's busy life working for the family firm Ermen and Engels in Manchester – worked against them.

The 1860s were a different story, though one that re-ran the 1840s on a bigger and even more international scale. Again, the biographical commentary on Marx tends to focus on the compromises that he did not want to make, rather than the ones that he did, and in particular – once again – the focus in non-Marxist accounts tends to be on an ultimate ‘failure’ that seems to erase the positive achievements. My point is that class and struggle, as a political perspective within democratizing political movements, inherently requires compromise, and in many respects Marx's skills here were at least as good as those of many others. And his activities were no worse necessarily for eschewing the compromises that – as with Jones – were a road to defeat and despair.

Marx was not particularly instrumental in the build-up to the IWMA in the early 1860s, nor actually a speaker at the foundational meeting in London. The impetus came from trades unions, concerned at the way that worker versus worker competition was driving down wages, particularly when workers were crossing borders as migrants – an issue with which Marx and Engels were thoroughly familiar: their secretive activisms were directed towards German-speaking migrants in Paris, Brussels and further afield in the USA. What was different in the 1860s was the publicly tolerated character of political organizations as such, and in particular the very limited but quite important toleration extended to working-class organizations, albeit variably and erratically. These circumstances marked quite a change from the proscribed, harassed and clandestine situation of political activities two decades earlier.

While no major regime offered universal male suffrage and full civil rights to all, or protected workers’ rights to organize in opposition to employers with legislation (rather the reverse), nonetheless repression in some Western European countries was, by comparison with the 1840s, less comprehensive, less intensive and less intractable. Conversely coalition-building amongst admittedly motley forces addressing the ‘social question’, loosely and fissiparously aligned, was possible. At the foundation of the International, Marx was appointed to the General Council, but his economic focus, and his – albeit ultimate – anti-capitalist revolutionary ideas, represented a very distinct minority voice, and barely a ‘tendency’. The bulk of those aligning themselves in the

IWMA were democratizing nationalists, reformist trades unionists and assorted utopians promoting cooperative colonies, social institutions and ethical and/or religious values.<sup>75</sup>

Rather than focusing on Marx's disagreements with any number of writers and associates through the later 1860s, and this (supposed) evidence of his apparently disagreeable nature, I turn here to two documents for which he is generally given considerable credit as draftsman. It should be evident from the above historical description that this working men's association looks much more like a social-democratic pressure group, or even political party (abstracting from its evident international make-up) than it resembles the much tighter ideological alignment of the revolutionary but putative Communist Party of 1847, which was in any case tiny, 'underground', swiftly lost in the smoke of the democratizing revolutions of 1848. Most of its fame, or rather infamy, arrived only with the highly publicized 'communist trials' in the early 1850s, and its mythologized resurrection by a socialist faction in the early 1870s.<sup>76</sup> The mid 1860s, therefore, are a good place to examine Marx's skills at coalition-building, which necessarily rest on compromise, and could consist of little else.

Marx's 'Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association'<sup>77</sup> is something of a rewrite of the *Manifesto*, minus the sweeping review of human history. It focuses on very recent history, reviewing political events, such as the American Civil War (1861–5), for their economic effects, and their potential for building working-class solidarity over against all the public and private forces arrayed against this goal. It argues the immiseration thesis, i.e. that as productivity and profits increase, working-class wages and resources will decline, which is not at all unlike the points made during the Occupy protests. And it contradicts economic arguments to the contrary, arguing – as does the *Manifesto* – that these are self- and class-serving hypocrisies.

Unlike the *Manifesto*, however, the Address reviews various successes for which Marx gives due credit to working-class activism, solidarity and self-organization. These successes – which were aspirational only in the repressive and authoritarian political

situation decades earlier – include such items as the passage of the Ten Hours Bill in 1847:

... a great practical success; it was the victory of a principle; it was the first time that in broad daylight the political economy of the middle class succumbed to the political economy of the working class.<sup>78</sup>

Marx then praises the cooperative movement in the sphere of consumption and cooperative factories for the sphere of production:

The value of these great social experiments cannot be overrated. By deed instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands.<sup>79</sup>

This latter point contrasts, rhetorically, with the highly – but not quite comprehensively – critical account of socialisms as alternatives to communism that Marx and Engels had developed in section III of the *Manifesto*.<sup>80</sup> In 1864 Marx draws a positive lesson: ‘cooperative labour ought to be developed to national dimensions’.<sup>81</sup> The conclusion is the same in both texts, though in the 1864 ‘Address’ it looks much more social-democratic – and in that sense, reformist – than it does in the *Manifesto*. It was less overtly revolutionary in its rhetoric since democratization was clearly on the move. And so – in contrast to the mass-driven upheavals of 1848 – the anti-democratic forces were somewhat in retreat by the 1860s, though not at all vanquished, and also not to be underestimated:

To conquer political power has, therefore, become the great duty of the working classes. They seem to have comprehended this, for in England, Germany, Italy and France, there have taken place simultaneous revivals ... of the working men's party.<sup>82</sup>

The politics here seems much more aligned with coalition and compromise than with economic desperation and street-fighting. Or to put it another way, desperation and street-fighting in the 1840s had – by the 1860s – secured some notable results. Like the *Manifesto*, Marx's ‘Address’ reviews the international situation in terms of rising liberal nationalisms (as in Poland) versus reactionary authoritarianism (as in Russia).<sup>83</sup> The text argues the necessity of

cross-national cooperation, assistance, forbearance and alliances, even when against local workers' immediate self-interest, as in the case of some British millworkers supporting the Union side against the cotton-producing 'slaveocracy' of the South in the American Civil War. And the concluding slogan is the same in both texts: 'Proletarians of all countries, unite!' [84](#)

## Conclusion

In conclusion, class and struggle – posed as class struggle – are terms that bring near-instant recognition as Marx's ideas and/or defining terms for Marxism, the posthumous and somewhat formulaic reduction of his political activism to 'thought'. But looking at Marx's activism as genuinely political and this-worldly, rather than viewing him as a thinker absorbed in abstractions, sets up a different set of circumstances. That revised viewpoint then allows us to make somewhat different judgements. Over the years compromise has been made to sound alien to this radical politics of the 'social question', and to Marx and Engels in particular, yet they had to practise it in order to gain any traction at all, and indeed to engage with others in committee and organizational settings, where we know that they actually operated. Marx would doubtless have been highly critical of much of what was said at – and in the name of – Occupy. But he would have been there at the 'demo' saying it, and pushing hard for programmatic solidarity. The 99 per cent images and logos made a statement, but pretty much only that in relation to an activist politics that would at least conceptualize the issues. Marx and Engels tried to do this and had some success within subsequent upheavals. And after 1872 their programmatic recommendations – and impressive analytical framework – then obtained some purchase in popular politics as mass electorates developed. We will have to see as yet what – if anything – emerges from Occupy and successor movements that address the 'social question'. Their activism works through political practices of democratization and make use of the constitutional and institutional structures that we have available – at least while we still have them. [85](#)



# Notes

1. See the historical and conceptual discussions in Will Atkinson, *Class* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), pp. 4–9,
2. Electoral registers are often amongst the few places where persons are not identified and sorted by gender (as M or F).
3. See ‘What are the Panama Papers?’ *Guardian*, 5 April 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/apr/03/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-panama-papers>
4. Kate Pickett and Richard G. Wilkinson, *The Spirit Level* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).
5. For a discussion of these issues, see Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); G. A. Cohen's Gifford Lectures published as *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're so Rich?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), rehearses the principal debating points.
6. For overview and discussion, see William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
7. <http://www.nycga.net/resources/documents/declaration/>
8. For an on-line listing that references nearly 1,000 cities in over 80 countries, including over 600 in the US, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Occupy\\_movement\\_protest\\_locations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Occupy_movement_protest_locations)
9. For a brief analytical study, see Margaret Kohn, *The Death and Life of the Urban Commonwealth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), ch. 7.
10. See [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Communism/Socialism’.
11. And on the advice of its allies: the newspaper was eventually closed down following a complaint by the notoriously absolutist and reactionary Czar Nicholas I of Russia; Stedman Jones, *Karl*



Marx, p. 120; readership may not have been large, but some readers evidently had international ‘reach’.

12. ‘Marx’s Initial Problematic: The Problem of Poverty’, *Political Studies* 24:1 (1976): 24–42; much of the discussion below draws on this article.

13. CW 1: 234; emphasis in original.

14. CW 1: 224–63.

15. CW 1: 230–1; emphasis in original; translation slightly modified.

16. CW 1: 312–13.

17. CW 1: 333.

18. CW 1: 332–58.

19. CW 1. 342.

20. CW 1: 337; emphasis in original.

21. CW 1: 347.

22. 2017 Index of Economic Freedom;  
<http://www.heritage.org/index/about>

23. See [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Socialism/Communism’.

24. ‘The Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen’ had but a short life in revolutionary France; its author, Olympe de Gouge (1748–1793), was beheaded during the terror.

25. Constitution of the United States of America, Fourteenth Amendment.

26. Leopold, *Young Karl Marx*, p. 20 n. 8.

27. CW 1: 262.

28. CW 1: 349; emphasis in original; translation slightly altered.

29. LPW 158–9; cf. CW 29: 261–2, which is evidently somewhat freer; see also [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx” ’.

- [30.](#) Engels to Richard Fisher, 15 April 1895, in *CW* 50: 497.
- [31.](#) Mark 14:7; Matthew 26:11; John 12:8.
- [32.](#) As noted in [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx” ’.
- [33.](#) These are terms Marx used himself, variously, but only rarely did he use ‘theory’ [*Theorie*]; *LPW* 1; *CW* 6: 482.
- [34.](#) See James Martin, *Politics and Rhetoric: A Critical Introduction* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2014).
- [35.](#) For a discussion, see James Martin, ‘The Rhetoric of the Manifesto’, in Carver and Farr (eds), *Cambridge Companion to The Communist Manifesto*, pp. 50–66.
- [36.](#) As we learned in [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx” ’.
- [37.](#) See [Chapter 5](#) ‘Capitalism and Revolution’.
- [38.](#) See [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx” ’; of course, a revision would have had to be published clandestinely.
- [39.](#) For a historical and documentary account, see Marcello Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite! The International 150 Years Later* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- [40.](#) Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 5 March 1852, in *CW* 39: 62; see also [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Communism/Socialism’.
- [41.](#) As we saw in [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx” ’.
- [42.](#) *CW* 6: 482.
- [43.](#) *CW* 6: 482.
- [44.](#) For my own re-translation of the *Manifesto* I substituted ‘commercial classes’ and ‘working classes’ for the German/French expressions (as more consistent with current usage in the 1990s), but the publisher's advisor stipulated that the ‘traditional’ (from 1888) but not-very-English locutions ‘bourgeoisie’ and ‘proletariat’ should stand in the published version; *LPW* 1–30, and *passim*.

45. CW 37: 870–1.
46. For a discussion of the role of labour and labour-power, as conceptual markers for class struggle within Marx's theorization of the 'capitalist mode of production', see [Chapter 5](#) 'Capitalism and Revolution', and [Chapter 6](#) 'Exploitation and Alienation'.
47. For a very brief overview that follows this outline, see Atkinson, *Class*, pp. 19–24.
48. Holt, *Social Thought of Karl Marx*, presents this view in ch. 4 ('Class'), pp. 89–119.
49. LPW 1; CW 6: 481.
50. Linking the 'spectre' to concepts of 'haunting' (as in the 1888 English translation) and 'hauntology' (as in Jacques Derrida's essay) seriously misconstrues Marx's argument, since haunting implies a return from the dead as a ghostly spectre, whereas the rhetorical point of the *Manifesto* is to counterpose to the living reality of communism a false and frightening apparition; the meaning of the text has nothing to do with death, and the rhetorical force is dissipated if communism has somehow died and merely 'haunts' us; see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Milton Park: Routledge, 2006 [1994]), and Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), ch. 1, for discussion.
51. Semiotically, red was used to signify the anti-royalist and therefore democratizing forces of the French Revolution, and in particular those most in opposition to compromise with hereditary and absolutist principles, as opposed to their invocations of popular sovereignty and constitutional egalitarianism.
52. For a political and philosophical overview and critical discussion, see Domenico Losurdo, *Class Struggle* (New York: Palgrave, 2016 [2013]).
53. Leszek Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P. S. Falla, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) consistently

associates Soviet communism and authoritarian repression with 'flaws' in Marx's thought, and is a monument to the genre.

54. Robert Payne's sensationalism in *Marx: A Biography* (London: W. H. Allen, 1968) is in this vein; see [Chapter 4](#) 'Democracy and Communism/Socialism'.
55. See E. H. Carr, *Karl Marx: A Study in Fanaticism* (London: J. M. Dent, 1938).
56. For quite a vivid and detailed account of the Marxes' political associations and activities in this pre-revolutionary period, see Mary Gabriel, *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), pp. 51–120, esp. Jenny's account of the purchase by Marx of firearms.
57. Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, pp. 239–40.
58. *CW* 4: 677.
59. [*Forward!*]
60. *CW* 38: 18.
61. Engels to Marx, 22 February–7 March 1845, *CW* 38: 22–3.
62. *CW* 38: 24.
63. *CW* 38: 22.
64. Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, pp. 237–44.
65. Marx to Proudhon, 5 May 1846, *CW* 38: 39.
66. As we saw in [Chapter 1](#) 'Making Marx "Marx" '; *CW* 38: 39–40.
67. *LPW* 8–12; *CW* 6: 496 uses the philosophically tendentious 'inevitable' for *unvermeidlich*.
68. *CW* 38: 25, 573 n. 37.
69. For a thorough discussion of Marx's relationship with utopians, socialist and otherwise, see Leopold, *Young Karl Marx*, ch. 5; see also [Chapter 4](#) 'Democracy and Communism/Socialism'.

- [70.](#) Engels to Marx, 17 March 1845, *CW* 38: 26.
- [71.](#) Marx to Engels, 7 January 1858, *CW* 40: 244.
- [72.](#) *CW* 40: 609–10 n. 245.
- [73.](#) Marx to Engels, 24 November 1857, *CW* 40: 210.
- [74.](#) Marx to Weydemeyer, 1 February 1859, *CW* 40: 375.
- [75.](#) Musto, *Workers Unite!*, pp. 1–6.
- [76.](#) As we saw in [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx” ’.
- [77.](#) *CW* 20: 5–13.
- [78.](#) Musto, *Workers Unite!*, p. 77; *CW* 20: 10–11.
- [79.](#) Musto, *Workers Unite!*, pp. 77–8; *CW* 20: 10–12.
- [80.](#) See the detailed discussion in David Leopold, ‘Marx, Engels and Other Socialisms’, in Carver and Farr (eds), *Cambridge Companion to The Communist Manifesto*, pp. 32–49.
- [81.](#) Musto, *Workers Unite!*, p. 78; *CW* 20: 11–12.
- [82.](#) Musto, *Workers Unite!*, p. 78; *CW* 20: 11–12.
- [83.](#) Musto, *Workers Unite!*, pp. 78–9; *CW* 20: 11–13.
- [84.](#) Musto, *Workers Unite!*, p. 79; *LPW* 30, ‘Proletarians of all countries unite!’ [1st edn 1848 in translation; also *CW* 20: 13]; *CW* 6: 519 ‘WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES UNITE!’ [English edn 1888].
- [85.](#) See [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Socialism/Communism’ for a discussion of Marx’s analysis of democratic constitutionalism as inherently fragile.

### 3

## History and Progress

It is somewhat difficult to connect political activism today with history lectures, and indeed methodological lectures on how to think about history. However pious the intention to ‘learn the lessons’ and ‘not repeat the mistakes’ of the past, the past is never all that much like the present, and the present not all that much like the past. The point of political activism is to make or protect a vision of the future, compared with which the present is unsatisfactory. This feature of human activity derives from a conviction that sequentialism matters in human affairs: what we think about anything and do about anything in any given present is uniquely structured by us because it has a position in an on-going timeline. This timeline is generally presumed to be uni-directional, not reversible, not circular and not cyclical, at least on most present understandings. In some contexts, though, time has been and is today configured rather differently, and political activism is engaged in ‘rolling the clock back’, revisiting a ‘golden age’ or referencing cyclical and circular motions that validate an activism of resistance to change.

Political discourse and rhetorics of activism at Occupy and within similar ‘umbrella’ coalitions quite possibly referenced any and all of these outlooks on time, and therefore on history. However, outside of specifically sectarian contexts the dominant view in secular discourses today is the uni-directional timeline that – paradoxically for this discussion – tends to devalue history as an initial or important point of reference. ‘What is to be done?’ at present and for the future is much more engaging rhetorically in this way than ‘What was done in the past?’ A timeless view of, say, ‘human nature’, works even less well. After all, if anything that happens is just ‘human nature’ as it always was, is and will be, then there's hardly much point to political activism in the first place.

Another way of looking at this, though, is to return to our presupposition of sequentialism, and view Marx in that light, particularly because he has become famous for a ‘theory of history’.

Possibly he is most famous today in many academic contexts for just this intellectual artefact, or at least it is widely accepted in many academic contexts that this 'theory' must be reckoned with.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, Marx and Engels's conceptualization of history in the *Manifesto*, for instance, and the specifics of their 'outlook' in that text on modern industrial society and its supposed successors in socialist and communist formations, all became rather formulaic after the 1890s. These formulae were not only a (minority) socialist orthodoxy, but also in counter-political response a toxic doctrine to be resisted and expunged. As the twentieth century unfolded, and the Bolshevik/anti-Bolshevik, communist/anti-communist, Soviet/anti-Soviet struggles took place, Marx's works were reprinted on a biblical scale, and notable historians positioned themselves in relation to the politics by positioning themselves in relation to a 'Marx' of their construction. Once Marx's views and texts were appropriated or misappropriated, and once he had achieved doctrinal status, whether as 'holy writ' or 'devil's work', his place in a historical sequence of receptions was fixed as a set of debating points about history. There is no escaping these, and any invocation of his name has to take this on board.

On the other hand, the reception of his ideas without his name has a place, too, so once the qualities of heroic virtue or villainous vice are detached from specific views about history, then we are dealing with today's more or less commonplace presumptions. Indeed these same presumptions became commonplace precisely because – and when – the association with Marx faded away. Looked at this way, Marx's views on history, and on the role of historical discussions within democratizing activisms, have been highly successful, and the more successful they have become, the less he seems to 'own' them, precisely because of the partisan fervour instanced above.

As the discussion below unfolds we shall get a sense of how this has happened, and therefore come to a judgement on how much his spectre haunts activisms such as Occupy. The object here, though, is not to burden Occupy or similar activisms with a spectre but rather to examine more carefully what exactly these activisms have to do with history. So the lack of history lectures at such events and debates does not mean that participants aren't making assumptions,



and using presumptions, that are about history. These presuppositions are about what is and is not significant in human affairs, and how new history-in-the-making (i.e. a better future) will drive present struggles forward.

## Marx, Engels and History

Given Marx's dedication to communist activism, history as a focus might seem an oddity for the reasons given above. What has a history lesson got to do with changing the world, rather than merely interpreting it?<sup>2</sup> The opening and substance of Marx and Engels's most obviously activist text, the *Manifesto* – whether considered in its original 1847/8 context, or in its more influential revival in the 1870s – is explicitly a historical review: how did we get here from where we were? Moreover, it is a definitional review: what exactly *is* history in the first place? Because Marx and Engels ‘trouble’ the notion of history itself, they offer a thoroughly re-envisioned and novel answer to both questions. Still, that in itself does not make a connection with political activism, then or now.

Even more puzzling, perhaps, is that Marx's political legacy has been constructed – in his time, and since his time – as an intellectual project, and in particular as the articulation and defence of the ‘materialist interpretation of history’.<sup>3</sup> This began with Engels's coining of the phrase in 1859, in a book review that few at the time will have read, where he paraphrases Marx on history for a popular audience:

The proposition that ‘the process of social, political and intellectual life in general is determined<sup>4</sup> by the mode of production of material life’; that all social and political relations, all religious and legal systems ... which arise in the course of history can only be understood if the material conditions of life ... are traced back to these material conditions – this proposition was a revolutionary discovery [by Marx].<sup>5</sup>

In this ‘branded’ and abstracted context Marx's ‘general conclusion’ and ‘guide for my studies’<sup>6</sup> lends itself to a predictive reading,

particularly framed with Engels's term 'materialist' (not mentioned in Marx's original text). Continuing with Engels's review,

[Marx writes] 'At a certain stage in their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or ... with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters ... The change in the economic foundation leads sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure ...'<sup>7</sup>

This passage moves the discussion from the synchronic (what is the case with social structures) to the diachronic (how a given social structure changes into a different one). This process, as Marx summarizes his thinking, generates powerful but unexplained and undefended terms and metaphors: productive forces, relations of production (specifically property systems) and a developmental dynamic that encounters 'fetters', so promising a transformation of 'base' and 'superstructure'. As a 'general conclusion' and 'guide' this *mélange* is quite rough – more of a riddle than a solution, a way of posing questions rather than positing ready-made answers.

The interpretive urge picked up again with Engels's more successful publicity efforts on Marx's behalf in the later 1870s. After Marx's death, and for the twelve years during which Engels outlived him, Engels continued with this framing – and defining – conceptualization of Marx's 'thought' abstracted into timeless propositions and predictive theses, framed with a 'materialist' evocation of certainty said to underpin socialist politics and class struggle. He did this in introductions, prefaces, journalism and independent works that have been very widely circulated ever since. From the late nineteenth century onwards history lectures – with a large dose of metaphysics – have been a defining feature of Marxism, and in introducing Marx as a 'thinker', history has often taken pride of place.<sup>8</sup>

After nearly 150 years of consensus it might seem mischievous to find the 'materialist interpretation of history' at all puzzling in relation to Marx, namely the business of 'having a theory of history',

not just whether or in what way his is ‘materialist’, and of course credible, or not. Indeed an understanding in the present of what history is considered to be, and what it was considered to be in the past, was obviously quite important to Marx, as we can tell from his published writings, manuscript materials and ‘excerpt notebooks’. And writing as an activist, and later on arising iconically in the re-published *Manifesto*, this concern with history was often where – in methodological terms – his discussions begin anyway. Clearly, though, Marx was *using* history, as reconceived by him and Engels, to provoke political action, rather than simply writing it for the intellectuals, academics and/or the general reader.

However, since the early twentieth century, attention to what Marx had to say about history as such, and about the historical circumstances and events he was investigating, has shifted to textual researches and close reading – rather on the Engels model – in order to determine the exact content of what he called his ‘outlook’ or ‘conception’,<sup>9</sup> encapsulated in the phrase ‘theory of history’. This has had two results: only texts that are held to be relevant to this issue – and indeed the ones most obviously suitable for abstracting *as* methodology<sup>10</sup> – are generally regarded as really significant when Marx comes up for study. The *Manifesto* contains many of the same ideas and terms (e.g. ‘fetters’) but does not lend itself to propositional abstraction, given that its rhetoric invokes people to action, rather than academics to study.

Engels's 1859 book review<sup>11</sup> inaugurated the process of enunciating Marx's ‘theory of history’, but not the process of defending it in serious debate, since Engels's rhetoric was one of certainty in proclaiming truths that were taken by him to be self-evident upon exposition, suitably contrasted with inferior ideas. The Russian revolutionary and self-styled theorist of Marxism, Georgi Plekhanov (1856–1918), was the first to defend, rather than simply expound Marx's theory. He did this in his Russian-language book *The Development of the Monist View of History* (1895), which was translated into German in 1896. It was followed by other essays and studies on ‘The Materialist Conception of History’, which were much translated and widely reprinted. These were instrumental in popularizing the foundation-(or base)-and-superstructure metaphor

as a defining feature of Marxism, along with ‘dialectical materialism’ as a scientific version of Hegelian metaphysics.<sup>12</sup> This latter derived from Engels's synthetic work on a ‘dialectic’, purportedly derived from Hegel, formulated as ‘laws’ applicable to ‘nature, history and thought’.<sup>13</sup> This was a tripartite schema projected onto – rather than textually derived from – Marx's (very few) appreciative comments on Hegel and (even rarer) forays into describing a ‘method’ (that would presuppose unity in his ‘thought’, rather than effectivity in his activism).<sup>14</sup> Just before he died Engels provided a personal endorsement of the views expressed by Plekhanov, sympathetically noting the difficulty of evading the Russian censors and of advocating revolution in such an autocratic and repressive context.

The issue here is not whether or not these précis and paraphrase treatments are ‘true’ in relation to Marx's texts, but rather to note how textual selection in relation to a ‘theory’ was acknowledged and pursued as a valid academic-style project in itself, or – in relation to others doing similar studies – how such debates on ‘theory’ were construed as crucial in processes of political positioning in doing socialist and/or revolutionary politics. In so far as Plekhanov was writing for, and working with, treasonous and subversive intellectuals in a pre-constitutional and anti-liberal context, his engagements with philosophy and philosophers apparently mimicked some of Marx's political efforts and strategies, not least in promoting an awareness of historical change and of liberal ‘Enlightenment’ values. But in less repressive contexts these debates – and eventually Marxist researches – look more like a displacement of politics into intellectual activity than like the organizational activism pursued by Marx himself. The brunt of Marx's so-called theory, taken in his activist and *ad hominem* rhetorical mode, was written precisely to undermine those intellectuals who fancied that they were doing politics when what they really did was philosophy, or in the case of Proudhon and *Proudhonistes*, a ‘philosophical economics’.<sup>15</sup>

That said, Marx – albeit unwittingly – inaugurated discussions that have made him an overwhelmingly important ‘theorist’. These intellectual efforts have vastly changed what historians consider history to be and what counts as a valid historiographical strategy.

And at the same time these debates have linked historiography to philosophy by requiring ontological and epistemological ‘foundations’ for historiography, rather than merely presuming enduring ‘human interest’ in ‘great men’ or adopting a position of moral rectitude rooted in religion or nationalism. Plekhanov's strategy – as a political narrative – was to locate Marx's theory of history in a sequence of politically progressive ‘materialisms’, where atheism, matter-in-motion and social productive activities filled out the required content that defined his crowning achievement. It follows that historians in general, proceeding from religious, moral, national and ‘human interest’ perspectives, have positioned themselves against such openly declared ‘materialist’ and ‘economic’ reductionism, and particularly against ‘dialectical’ metaphysics, as argued by Plekhanov and his self-identified ‘Marxist’ confrères. Ironically since then Marxists have often found themselves uncomfortably positioned against Marx's extant texts, which – other than in a very few tentative summary ‘guide for my studies’ remarks<sup>16</sup> – are exploratory in character, rather than reductive to certainties, even to ‘economic’ activity as a ‘material’<sup>17</sup> basis. This approach has considerably narrowed the field of vision for most commentators – paradoxically, as it happens – just as huge amounts of Marx's writings were being collected, transcribed and published, including lengthy historical disquisitions and ruminative explorations. And considerable efforts within this realm of highly focused commentary were directed towards determining in what sense – if any – this ‘theory’<sup>18</sup> was true or false, and further – and at quite some length – on what epistemological grounds this enquiry and judgement might be conducted.

The ‘analytical Marxism’ groups of the later 1970s and the 1980s took a self-styled ‘rigorous’ approach to the ‘theory’ of history, and were notable in bringing together linguistic philosophers, economic historians, game theorists and rational choice perspectives.<sup>19</sup> Declaring themselves against Hegelian metaphysics, and Engels's ruminations on a ‘materialist’ dialectic (later bastardized as thesis–antithesis–synthesis and versions of ‘dialectical materialism’),<sup>20</sup> analytical Marxists rooted their works in an empiricism that was said to be in accord with science. On their view of science, validation (or at least falsification) were strict requirements in constructing

propositions that could be tested against facts in history, which historical research could uncover. The mini-manifesto for the 'school' stated that their works were

intended to exemplify a new paradigm in the study of Marxist social theory. They will not be dogmatic or purely exegetical in approach. Rather, they will examine and develop the theory pioneered by Marx, in the light of the intervening history, and with the tools of non-Marxist social science and philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

Their hope was 'that Marxist thought will thereby be freed from the increasingly discredited methods and presuppositions which are still widely regarded as essential to it, and that what is true and important in Marxism will be more firmly established'.<sup>22</sup> This approach of course presupposed that rewriting Marx's prose into such propositions was a service (indeed, an exercise in his 'defence') and that scholar-scientists could – for everyone's benefit – decide the truth (or otherwise) of the 'theory' thus ascribed to Marx, or rather to those passages in certain texts of his that were deemed to be his 'best shot' at it.

Analytical Marxists set up notable puzzles in linguistic determination, in particular how descriptive terms, such as 'mode of production', 'forces of production', 'relations of production', 'economic base', 'ideological superstructure' and the like (abstracted without political context from a small number of passages in published and rough manuscript texts) could be defined and related in a more logical manner than Marx had managed. Cohen parsed Marx's (admittedly rather rambling and 'indicative') phrases into these major propositions:

- a. The productive forces tend to develop throughout history (the Development Thesis).
- b. The nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces (the Primacy [of productive forces] Thesis proper).
- c. ...
- d. Men are ... somewhat rational.



- e. The historical situation of men is one of scarcity.
- f. Men possess intelligence of a kind and degree which enables them to improve their situation.<sup>23</sup>

Cohen took up at length questions as to what on-going structural relationships and falsifiable predictive claims could be deduced from Marx's now-rewritten prose. In particular these problems included the truth (or otherwise) of economic or technological 'determinism' in effecting historical change from one mode of production to another, and ultimately in deciding whether or not proletarian revolution is 'inevitable' (or not), given the 'logical' structure ascribed to Marx's views and 'reasonable' presumptions concerning 'human nature' that he then adduced in Marx's text.<sup>24</sup> Given the fierce commitment to methodological 'rigour' espoused by analytical Marxists, who rooted their claims in a philosophy of science as a universal and singular set of presumptions and protocols, the project ultimately and inevitably awarded Marx very little credit on their twentieth-century terms. In a peroration from the following decade Cohen wrote:

I called my book on Karl Marx's theory of history a *defence*, because in it I defended what I took ... to be true ... More recently, however, I have come to wonder whether the theory which the book defends is true ... I do not now believe that historical materialism is false, but I am not sure how to tell whether or not it is true ... I tried ... to make the theory more determinate, and thereby to clarify its confirmation conditions, but ... substantial further clarification is required.<sup>25</sup>

The 'analytical' terms through which 'rigour' was expressed (by Cohen and others) were themselves already by then under critique from revisionist scholars in the sociology and history of science,<sup>26</sup> and from post-structuralists developing a radically different view of language, truth and logic.<sup>27</sup>

What is notably missing from most of these 'abstracting' discussions, 'analytical' or otherwise, is any sustained engagement with what the views authored by Marx – what history is, how change occurs (or does not) and what significant change consists in – were actually *for* in his own context. In short, what difference does it make to an



activist – imbued with critical views on the present, and looking forward to a better future – to engage with ‘history’ substantially and methodologically? How are these discussions supposed to garner an audience, unite a movement, proceed to a goal? Part of the answer to this question lies with the nature of politics in Marx's time in the German states of the 1840s and 1850s, where discussion of issues and suggestions for change were almost entirely unwelcome, and where constitutions empowering a sovereign people and therefore a well-informed public were entirely missing.<sup>28</sup> University intellectuals were tolerated at best, rather than protected, or in notable cases, they were not tolerated, and so were subjected to exclusion and persecution. At age twenty-three, Marx – with a new PhD – fell straight into the latter category, but unsurprisingly continued to do what he was good at, which was conducting a battle of ideas (any other kind of battling was disposed of as swiftly as possible). In the German states these kinds of discussion were admitted to the press only when sufficiently emended by censors, or efficiently smuggled over borders from abroad, most usually Switzerland or Belgium or France. Marx's writings – liberal journalism, *ad hominem* intellectual polemic and a popular manifesto and flysheet of ‘demands’<sup>29</sup> – fell into both categories: censored and smuggled.

While this might establish a context within which high-level discussions of history had a place, and perhaps an audience, albeit very limited, it does not yet explain why Marx – and Engels, at times – devoted a notable amount of brainpower to questions of this kind. Why not state the programme, write the vision, make the speeches and do the pamphleteering? As it happens, though, we know from recent research that the two pursued their activist writings – primarily criticisms of contemporary German socialists and communists – to the *exclusion* of some of their ruminations on issues later encapsulated as the ‘materialist interpretation of history’.<sup>30</sup> This was not total exclusion, however, but rather a process of editing out exploratory materials and expository tangents so as to make much briefer points about history directly to those whom they regarded as oppositional, e.g. Bauer and Proudhon.

Thus we are looking here at an effect of reception: our two authors were conducting *ad hominem* polemical debates with current

personalities in relation to current issues and political possibilities; later readers tune this out, finding it incomprehensible, or often in Marx's case, highly tedious. What later readers deduce or rescue are most often the more abstract thoughts and concepts that could be useful in thinking through *their* current issues and political possibilities. Throughout the 1840s, though, abstractions were not the point: actually the point for Marx and Engels was that their interlocutors were *too* abstract, not simply abstract in the wrong way, hence the duo's determination not to lecture *too much* about 'history'.

Given that *all* their interlocutors in the 1840s were strongly for constitutionalism and popular sovereignty, it may seem strange and indeed perverse for Marx and Engels to have devoted so much time to criticizing fellow intellectuals who were – in some sense – on the same side. These interlocutors were self-declared socialists or communists, or at least prepared to suggest that these subjects – that is, the 'social question' – warranted sympathetic attention. But as previously explained,<sup>31</sup> the constitutional basics of popular sovereignty were by definition revolutionary in the German states, and therefore seditious and ultimately treasonous. Marx focused on refining communist ideas as a necessary prolegomenon to a liberalizing, revolutionary activism, which did not yet exist, except in clandestine whispers, because he did not need to preach to the already converted. Rather he strove to get them – those already converted to a revolutionary liberalism – into a better understanding of the current situation, a sober assessment of the opposition and a realistic view of current potential.

Engels had a somewhat more interesting record in this regard, because he had other contexts available, having published some fifty newspaper articles and a notable book by the time he and Marx teamed up politically in the spring of 1845. This was because Engels had lived and worked in England, and had had political associations with – and considerable knowledge of – the Chartist politics and democratizing publicity of the time, as well as on-the-ground experience of the industrial, commercial and (unusually) working-classes. Unlike the situation in the German states, this involved mass demonstrations, and it caused mass – rather than simply individual – repression and persecution. While very much focused on current

events, in English and in German, Engels's activist writings nonetheless dealt with themes that meshed nicely with Marx's more philosophically and methodologically sophisticated interests in history. Indeed Marx later credited Engels with having arrived at the same conclusions as himself, but 'by another road', particularly mentioning Engels's decidedly non-historical German-language book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*<sup>32</sup> of 1845. However, this merely restates the puzzle: why should communist activism require such a discussion – of history and of historical method – at the outset?

## Everyday Pasts and Everyday Futures<sup>33</sup>

The puzzle resolves when we consider Marx's rhetorical strategy in engaging his communist colleagues, who were perforce rivals, rather than *confrères*. That is, making sense of the present requires, so he argues, making sense of the past. And he argues the converse: if the wrong sense of the past lurks behind political judgements concerning the present, then those political judgements will be the wrong ones. These political judgements could of course relate to what actually is wrong with the present – which for communists was the 'social question' of poverty, inequality, oppression and authoritarianism – and also with exactly how the near and distant futures could be organized to ameliorate, reform and revolutionize human social experience.

Communists and socialists – the terms were often, though not always interchangeable at the time – offered any number of views of the future, which rhetorically and politically was obviously the point. The intellectual context of the time has been reconstructed over many years in various scholarly receptions; what is more difficult to capture now is the sense of activist and popular engagement – the enthusiasms and naïveté of it all – since this tends not to display itself in the historical record, and when it does, the evidence is often visual (and more recently, aural), rather than textual. For all their internecine hostilities, though, some of this emotional intensity and political focus is captured in Marx's and Engels's writing, since in itself it constitutes a reception-of-the-moment, rather than a philosophical statement as if 'for the ages'.

Contextual scholarship on Marx and Engels has paradoxically made this difficult to grasp, since scholarly focus is usually on the two, their writings and what can be salvaged in intellectual terms for later interest. Because of this focus, the interlocutors – so important at the time, and to the writing as it was ‘posted’ to the communities involved – tend to fade into the background, since – unlike Marx and Engels – they have become minor figures, albeit to us, but not to their contemporaries, and to Marx and Engels in particular. Thus dialogues are read in a one-sided way, most often, and Marx and Engels become monological. However, the further problem is that the passion of the time then looks odd, since the politics vanishes along with the personalities. In any case political circumstances in already democratized societies have marginalized the kind of petty but potent authoritarianism of the time, against which radicals were struggling. Why would Marx and Engels have engaged with such nobodies? And why were they so passionate about this? Working from texts, and from much later presuppositions, tends to generate these questions, but generally produces no really convincing answers. Hence it is interesting to turn to a text that captures something of the immediacy that Marx and Engels were experiencing.

While notably and often sarcastically critical and disparaging, section III of the *Manifesto* offers a *tour d’horizon* of socialisms and communisms of the 1840s, organized by political valence and intellectual tendency. Marx had prior ambitions to publish such a critical survey, and Engels actually had considerable experience as a journalist offering reportage on such subjects. What stands out in the (now little-read) discussion in the *Manifesto* is not just the withering scorn that Marx and Engels undoubtedly cultivated with respect to religion in general and Christianity in particular, but also similarly dismissive views of small-scale utopian ‘colonies’ and experiments, and Rousseauesque regressions to agrarian and other ‘simple’ or ‘natural’ lifestyles. This tells us quite a lot about where Marx and Engels *did not* want to start: no faith-based solutions; no small-scale, small-group isolationism; and no pre-industrial folk-craft idylls, ‘natural’ or otherwise.<sup>34</sup>

Instead Marx's approach to this mélange of ideas about humanity (past, present, future) was to engage positively in a manner that was

notably alternative, and still stands out today as an activist tactic, as my discussion here will demonstrate. Shrewdly the aim was political: these socialisms and communisms would not work as solutions, because the problems of the present were misconceived, and those problems were misconceived, because the nature of history – and thus of the historical change needed to make a faulty present into a better future – was misconceived. And history itself was misconceived – or in most cases not really addressed at all – because civilization was misconceived. Moreover, civilization was misconceived because humanity itself was misconceived. As a rigorous chain of logic this possibly makes sense in its own terms, and in terms of political activism it might also rally an audience of a certain sort – or it might not. The *Manifesto*, sections I and II, were certainly a good try at rallying an audience in the 1840s, though only later, in the context of the 1870s, did this content finally achieve mass circulation – but it was then at somewhat of a remove from current issues, as Marx and Engels themselves readily acknowledged.<sup>35</sup>

Leaving aside the notoriously vexed questions as to whether, or in what sense, Marx's and Engels's texts represents a 'theory', and if so, in what sense that 'theory' is or is not 'materialist' or 'determinist' (words not used in the *Manifesto* at all), let us consider what the main principles seem to be that Marx and Engels referred to in 1872 but did not actually list in their joint Preface to the 'feature' edition. In my own words I suggest the following:

- People make history – supernatural or immaterial entities do not do this.
- Ordinary processes of day-to-day production and consumption are what really matter to most people in the past and present – not dynasties or battles.
- Civilization rests on production and consumption that is surplus to subsistence as a social aggregate – not on morals or values or art or the like.
- The division of labour (or of not labouring) and the division of consumption (whether at or below subsistence, or on up the scale to idle luxury) are features of civilized societies.

- These gradations – legal and political – in the need or obligation to labour, and of the resources available to groups and individuals for consumption, are predictable sources of domination, resistance and struggle as a matter of structure – over which, or within which, individuals realistically have little choice.
- Religious, moral, intellectual, artistic and political ideas about rulership generally follow from, and are generally contested within, these structural fault lines of struggle – however complicated, and various and contradictory they are in detail.
- Modern industry marks a break with previous kinds of technologies, and thus of social gradations and political institutions, because of its vastly increased productivity, resulting from recently introduced steam-driven production and automated manufacturing processes.
- Conquest and trade make this intensified and intensifying economic activity a truly global phenomenon, and increasingly so.
- Inequalities of wealth and power are becoming more, rather than less extreme as these structures and forces develop, and contrary equalizing movements and policies require considerable political struggle.
- The contrast between the productive potential for goods and services, and the highly differential patterns of work and consumption, will become more glaring – though political responses will be highly varied.
- This ‘outlook’ on history states the ‘social question’ in precise form, which communism must resolve – as opposed to alternative views that are less historically well informed and/or less plausible as political strategies.

Or as it says in the *Manifesto*, ‘History is the history of class struggles.’ And ‘class struggles’ are where communists should locate themselves politically, putting forth the messages above and drawing local conclusions for action.<sup>36</sup>

On the one hand, this message has been hugely inspirational in worldwide political movements, both social-democratic ones in



established nation-states, and in contexts of national liberation struggles and nation-building around the de-colonizing world. The view that the global rise of modern processes of mechanized and highly productive resource extraction, product manufacture and heavy transport are virtually unstoppable for any reason seems entirely plausible, given the patterns of production and consumption through which globalization has been conceptualized and charted.<sup>37</sup> Certainly small and large societies and states that have resisted international market forces and great power politics, on any number of grounds, have generally, and in any number of ways, succumbed to the social changes that Marx and Engels had outlined already in the 1840s. At that point steam-powered manufactures and heavy transport systems were just taking off, mainly in the context of Britain and its colonial and other zones of trade and conquest. As the *Manifesto* says very powerfully in descriptive terms:

The harnessing of natural forces, machinery, the application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steamships, railways, the telegraph, clearance of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured up from the ground ... .<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, something of the activist enthusiasm and intellectual novelty has understandably faded since then as Marx's and Engels's language has become dated and their points of contemporary reference obscure. However, the 'outlook' has become somewhat commonplace and taken for granted. And perhaps surprisingly, most of this slack has been taken up with academic exegesis, truth-tests, attacks, defences and second-order discussion, i.e. what are the grounds for making these claims and judgements? There is a strikingly circular quality to this use of Marx, though. To 'test' the validity of his theorizations one has to know already what 'history' actually is, and what within it is already known to be significant. Whether the issue is 'clash of civilizations',<sup>39</sup> or particular 'great wars', or the rise or fall of democracy as a political form, or the creation of world markets through capitalist enterprises, Marx's alleged obsession with so-called economic explanations and ascribed determinisms has been tested against received opinion regarding humanity, society and civilization, which was – in Marx's time – exactly what he was seeking to displace.



Taking an alternative view here, I suggest that whether or not Marx and Engels's 'outlook is 'right' or 'wrong' on some exogenous criteria, what is striking in their revisioning of history is at bottom the definitional issue: they are arguing that what counts as history, and as notable historical change, is up for grabs as a question in the first place. Asking the typical argumentative question whether or not 'economics determines history' thus begs the really interesting question: what is worth regarding as interesting enough – and particularly for whom and why – to constitute history as a matter of significance, no matter how different this might be from conventional, professional and academic historiography?

The result of asking this question, and answering it in Marx and Engels's terms, is curiously archaeological in approach: it is the artefacts that matter, as they do when texts are absent, i.e. in pre-history, so-called. If we follow only the texts, that is, if we work from times when written records have become available, this familiar approach effectively contradicts one of the interesting points made in the *Manifesto*: the ideas recounted in texts already have some relationship – however variable – with the socio-economic relationships and institutions through which surplus production is made available for differential distribution and consumption on whatever basis. Since written texts presume these relations as a rule, they usually do not talk about them very much or very critically, and therefore what we read, as Marx and Engels say in a rhetorically reductive but striking quotation, are these: 'The ideas of an age were always but the ideas of the ruling class.'<sup>40</sup>

These ideas in historical texts can of course be tested, at least sometimes, against contemporary views that struggle against them in various ways. But the artefacts are generally missing, marginalized as only of interest to industrial archaeologists, rather than to historians as such. Putting the matter polemically we could perhaps say that if Marx and Engels were to commission a museum of civilization it would consist in the first instance of displays of rather unbeautiful tools, reconstructions of unlovely places of production, reproductions of quite simple foodstuffs and furniture such as ordinary people would have and developments in the history of the fireplace, chimney, hammer and screw as moments of high drama.<sup>41</sup>

The polemical point here is really a contrast: it is not that this artefactual approach is all that there is to civilization; it is rather that civilization has generally been made synonymous with 'high' politics, 'high' intellect, 'high' taste, 'high' art and the like. And perhaps it is worth taking the 'everyday' and 'Everyman' (and woman) point of view, making these processes central, and seeing how this plays out. Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto* had no great claim that art and battles have *no* significance at all in human history, but rather that 'everyday' processes constitute 'lived experience' for most people, and that changes in these processes are at least as significant as the changes in dynasties or faiths that historians have been comfortable recounting, perhaps overly so.<sup>42</sup>

Since the late twentieth century, history has been increasingly conceptualized in something like the way that Marx and Engels were advocating, though as more of an 'alternative' or a supplement to conventional historiography than as a replacement. Or in terms of this discussion, Marx and Engels's novelty is not in discovering the influence of 'economics' in history, or in attributing a 'determinism'<sup>43</sup> to economic factors, but – to reiterate my point – to try to open up the definitional question of 'history' and to sketch an answer that still resounds and creates controversy. Women's history, the history of the working-class, 'hidden' histories of indigenous, marginalized and colonized peoples all owe a considerable debt to the novel approach articulated by Marx and Engels, even if – and in most cases even though – their actual texts do not themselves generate histories of these exact types or even mention the issues involved as notable.

Opening up this definitional question concerning history, then, leads us to the 'why' question: why are people doing these everyday things in different ways at different times, yet apparently in ways that – with fits and starts – have somehow resulted in modern, highly productive industrial, steam-driven processes of resource extraction and product manufacture? Marx and Engels were not the first to address this question, but they were notable in cogitating – though not in the *Manifesto* – on the human condition as an abstract but still historical subject, and one enacting itself in the uni-directional timelines and 'path-dependent' sequential manner discussed above. These cogitations were largely, though not wholly, excised by the

authors from the polemical contexts and manuscripts of the 1840s, no doubt as 'too theoretical' for the business of political cut-and-thrust. This, as mentioned above, is opposite to the academic reaction to Marx and Engels since the turn of the twentieth century, because in that context the more philosophical and abstract the comments, the better.

Interestingly in these ruminations Marx avoids the twin perils of triumph and tragedy, i.e. the human condition as one driven by improvements and successes, or the human condition as one doomed to contradiction and unhappiness. The former – improvements and successes – was characteristic of notable political economists a generation or two before Marx's time, though certainly not of all, Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) being a particular exception. The latter – contradiction and unhappiness – was characteristic of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–78) way of thinking through the relationship between early industrialization and commercialism, hence the increasing indifference and cruelty that he detected in 'civilized' social relationships and political structures.<sup>44</sup>

Marx avoided the 'why' questions that tend to resolve into moralizing: humanity could be said to be increasingly good, because it is 'improving' its resources; or humanity could be said to be bad, because 'improvements' are making it increasingly cruel. From Marx's point of view humanity has – rather unbeknownst to its intellectuals – been altering its relationship to material resources in everyday ways, and – however this took place – it has embarked very recently on a huge change in production through which increasingly powerful everyday processes are becoming global and increasingly uniform. But for this view of history-making and history-changing to have plausibility, there is no further need to speculate on the 'why' question, which would in any case tie humanity down – in effect – to something that someone could know already, rather than to see humanity as an open-ended potentiality beyond anyone's predictive powers. Or to put it another way, a notion that humanity has some timelessly identifiable characteristic(s) such that uplift or downfall can be predicted itself requires a timeless point of view – which is not open to anybody, if one thinks critically and carefully about this commonplace kind of discourse.

Marx and Engels's political deductions from this picture had a rhetorical import at the time, and were performative in character, rather than strictly descriptive. If and when people believe in this picture, then – so runs the narrative thrust of the *Manifesto* – they will make their politics one of class struggle, which would then play out as victory for the everyday labouring class, or – in the little-quoted alternative scenario – as the ‘common ruin of the contending classes’.<sup>45</sup> Class struggle is thus a practice, which might – or might not – take place, rather than a ‘thing’ or ‘factor’ or ‘force’ that could always and anywhere be identified descriptively and isolated for observation. After all, if class struggle were something that operated independently of politics, there would have been no need for such a rousing *Manifesto* to get people on side and in tune.<sup>46</sup>

But class struggle is also, in the text, a ‘more or less hidden civil war’.<sup>47</sup> This is yet another foray into historiographical issues that poses difficulties: can something ‘more or less’ hidden from observation explain what one observes in texts and artefacts? ‘Why not?’ seems to be the answer, and since that time there have been numerous defences of the role of ‘unobservables’ within the philosophy of science. But again the issue here is not whether the answer is correct or not, according to some epistemological protocol of truth, but rather how readers – who are potential activists – will react to the idea that they should look harder at ‘everyday’ phenomena and not take appearances for granted.

Marx and Engels's discussions of history – and their use of history in politicizing rhetorics – is interestingly prospective, given that the retrospective elements of their narrative are marshalled to demonstrate the malleability of human relationships, focusing of course on those of everyday production and consumption, and the structural contexts through which these operate. Conventional historiographies often operate on the principle that we must learn from the mistakes of the past so as not to repeat them in the future. Marx and Engels's historiography (in the 1840s for Engels, anyway) seems to operate from a contrasting principle: the variability of the past indicates that the future is what humanity will make it. The former principle presumes that the concept of humanity incorporates notions of right/wrong and good/bad such that we can judge what

‘mistakes’ consist in, and that this constitution of ‘human nature’ persists timelessly into the future. The latter principle presumes that humanity is self-constituting and that its ‘nature’ – if that concept makes any sense – consists in a malleability, the limits of which cannot be foreseen, and therefore known determinately.<sup>48</sup>

Looking at Marx and Engels's historiography this way will have certain interpretive effects, in that it will look more exploratory, particularly in Marx's case, and less demonstrative and argumentative than has generally been assumed. Asking historical questions, and conducting researches, as Marx did very extensively, will thus have an element of ‘finding something out’ on the basis of an ‘outlook’ (whatever the result) rather than ‘proving the truth’ or otherwise of an already formulated ‘theory’. Given his political views, and his approach to the human potential, the aspect of history that most interested Marx was always the development of commodified relations of production and exchange, and within that way of producing and consuming goods and services, the very recent changes that for him constituted the ‘bourgeois mode of production’. Only later in Marx's lifetime was that social formation termed ‘capitalism’, a word he seldom used. This distinctive development within history was constituted by the twin engines of mechanized production and financialized circulation, positing limitless productivity and limitless accumulation. These processes were well known at the time to be subject to crises, a view that Engels summarized in his ‘Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy’,<sup>49</sup> on which Marx took notes at the time and excitedly formulated plans for his own critique of the politics that argued otherwise.<sup>50</sup>

In terms of his now famous researches – collected in the twentieth century from manuscript materials and voluminous notebooks – Marx was intrigued with how this change developed where it did. The discussion in the *Manifesto* mentions the importation of gold into Europe derived from the Spanish conquests in the Americas, for instance.<sup>51</sup> The point made there was to focus on the impetus to trade in northwestern Europe that then stimulated a vast increase in production and intense development of commercial relationships. But Marx was also – though not quite equally – very intrigued by how and why such a change did not develop elsewhere, in particular



in the period of the late Roman Empire, and indeed in other ‘pre-capitalist economic formations’.<sup>52</sup> In conventional commentary this is taken to be a typological exercise following from – because derived from – the ‘materialist interpretation of history’, and thus a circular project in self-validation. On that view the object would be to determine exactly what factors were or were not present such that modern industrial society developed at a later point, rather than at an earlier one. Read in that way, Marx's ‘outlook’ on history has been highly influential – from the mid twentieth century onwards – among academic historians, though certainly not without controversy and contrary approaches.<sup>53</sup>

But read in that way readers miss the contingency in Marx's enquiries, the riveting curiosity just to find out ‘what was going on’ in open-ended detail and thus to see how human activity always generates any number of possible outcomes, so working without the sort of methodological presumptions that would necessarily obscure what could be found out. Or in other words, if one decides in advance that it is ‘great men’ or ‘technological innovation’ or ‘mass invasions’ or ‘religious wars’ that ‘truly’ make the difference, one would overlook or downgrade any number of important elements within which humanity makes the history that it does. Some readers will find this way of reading Marx, and indeed way of regarding history, as disorganized, frustrating and obsessive. Others might simply revel in the detail and admire the open-minded curiosity. The whole idea that history might have anything much to do with ‘everyday’ people<sup>54</sup> and technologies was novel in Marx's time, and even then – as sometimes now – invigorated by political economists, who created the focus in the first place, and economic historians, who followed suit.

Of course in Marx's time there was not all that much history that one could know, and certainly very little work had yet been done regarding artefacts of the everyday, which would have been limited to the few investigations of pre-history that were sporadically underway. Historical sources, and hence approved areas of enquiry, were limited to classical and medieval texts, biblical and Christian manuscripts, occasional antiquarian curiosity collectors and the beginnings of systematic archaeology of the Greco-Roman world,

including Egyptian antiquities. Despite the obviously Euro-centric limitations here in terms of interests and materials, Marx made efforts over the years to enquire into less known and poorly resourced areas of historical writing by and for Europeans, such as on India, China, Russia and – notably – the Americas.<sup>55</sup> While some of these efforts seem rudimentary and occasionally ambiguous or wrong-headed by later standards, the spirit of enquiry comes through, notwithstanding efforts by commentators to portray Marx as self-contradictory, given that his studies were framed by them as efforts to ‘prove’ his ‘theory’, but that did not always work, even to his own satisfaction.

One helpful move here is to consider carefully Marx's politics in relation to his researching strategies. If it is assumed that his politics rests – or is supposed to rest – on the proven truth of his ‘outlook’, then his undoubted political dedication to democratizing revolutions and communist-minded outcomes is driving his researches in the tautological ways described above. However, if his politics is driven instead by a performative rhetoric – as the *Manifesto* and other hortatory writings indicate – then his historical researches represent an enquiry into human activities that can and did go in any number of directions. There are thus any number of things that can be learned from Marx's enquiries and explorations, and so any number of options open to human agents at present. Possibly some of Marx's reluctance to write detailed outlines for a communist society – and persistent failure to act as programmatic guru to a mass movement – derives from just this modesty (or perhaps wariness) concerning the indeterminacy of events, and of course of individual actions. This can be demonstrated, for instance, by his detailed consideration of the political struggles of 1848–9, particularly in France.

Marx's pamphlet *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*<sup>56</sup> was initially derived from his journalism of 1848–9 written and published during the revolutionary events that swept across continental Europe. Within that period mass action deposed non-constitutional authoritarian rulers and substituted – for a short time – institutions of popular rule and assemblies for constitution-making. The publication of Marx's pamphlet in 1852 was of course a political intervention, written in German but widely circulated only in the United States, because of the publishing vagaries that always



plagued Marx. Plans for translations did not materialize, which was also not unusual for him, but the intention was clear: like Victor Hugo (1802–85), Marx would warn the French public, and others who might be concerned, that Louis Bonaparte (1808–73) was a criminal swindler, and not a saviour-incarnation of his imperial uncle.

In terms of subsequent reception and commentary this highly topical – almost docudrama – work of high-spirited and sarcastic prose has been received as ‘historical’, not least because Marx's text is replete with all the personalities of the time, many of whom would have to be looked up in works of reference by readers as the years wore on. And indeed the close attention Marx pays in the text to the interplay of personalities and political forces becomes difficult to follow for later readers, and difficult to get excited about. While this work was not history when Marx was writing it – it was very much of the present and very much a political intervention into that situation – it is nonetheless indicative of the kind of historical work that really intrigued him, namely thorough burrowing into detail, including foibles, eccentricities and foolishness. His later work is certainly more economic in character, since there were more accessible materials, and Marx's interests focused more on materials of that type, given the lack of revolutionary violence and political upheaval in those years. But this focus was not exclusive: Marx's journalism of the later 1850s and 1860s again shows an interest in and grasp of detail in writing up history-as-it-unfolded. His work includes much emphasis on personality and serendipity, as in his considerations of European great-power politics relating to ‘The Eastern Question’ and British colonial politics relating to India and Ireland.<sup>57</sup> But from the point of view of most later commentators and biographers, these writings were brief, ephemeral and disparate, unlike the focused reportage articulated in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. But from Marx's point of view – and from a point of view that values activist engagement – these varied works will appear seamless, contemporary and passionate.

## Methodological Historicism

This way of reading Marx, and of making political sense of his focus on history, reveals that he was a historicist all the way down, using and developing a view of knowledge as practice, practice as politics and politics as future-making. Epistemology is thus socialized and historicized, so knowledge, and therefore the criteria for truth or falsity, can no longer be construed in any way that abstracts from human activities located sequentially in time. Of course this is still today a very radical view, one that cuts out Christian or other eschatology or similar narratives about who 'we' are as humanity, what 'we' are here for and what our end or purpose is, how this will come about and what happens when history is 'over'. Or rather, from Marx's point of view, all this may come about, but only if people organize themselves to make 'it' happen, whatever the 'it' is that they are trying to make. Having taken the view that foundational standards, whether derived from religious views or philosophical speculations (e.g. on 'human nature'), are always necessarily effects of human-driven socio-economic processes (as we learned from the discussion of the *Manifesto* above), Marx could hardly appeal to any entities supposedly external to human knowledge and experience, or to supposed factors within human biology, psychology, spirituality or technologies that would either determine or guide humanity to an 'ultimate' goal.

Efforts to prove the truth (or otherwise) of the 'materialist interpretation of history' were a defining feature of Marxism for many years, whether the commentators were Marxists proving a truth about history, or anti-Marxists arguing that history instead follows some other pattern, without necessarily specifying which. In effect both these approaches located a 'foundation' for knowledge of society – its past, present and future – within 'history itself', that is, a timeless account of human experience that presupposes some inherent pattern of which one could gain knowledge. That of course posed not simply the question as to what that knowledge is, but how it could be used as a guide to action. Or indeed the more difficult question, namely did it need to be used – or simply just 'known' – such that one would have knowledge of something already happening in a given society or encompassing all of humanity. This dilemma concerning knowledge and agency played out in various ways in Marxist politics as and when self-declared Marxist groups

and parties gained political power, or at least enough power to generate demands for change, and to make changes. Alternatively some Marxists argued against such ‘voluntarism’ on grounds that ‘history’ would play out its own determinism. But the dilemma is hardly a Marxist invention: any view that locates important knowledge about humanity within a timeless pattern, or a pattern known to exist and develop in time, falls into the same trap.

However, politically this was quite a popular trap to fall into, and the promise of a determinism – and hence of knowledge of the past, present and future known to be true – undoubtedly generated enthusiasm and brought converts to the communist cause, as it does with religions, pseudo-religions or philosophies similarly constructed. In his later years Engels – as publicist for Marx – played into this, and indeed it is from that era – 1859 onwards – that the ‘materialist interpretation of history’ originated, and, from the later 1870s, circulated very widely as foundational to a science. Marx undoubtedly tolerated this – after all, he and Engels were political partners – and he does not seem to have created any explicit confrontations. But there are numerous texts and remarks from his later years reflecting continuities in his understanding of history, namely that it is made contingently through human activities.<sup>58</sup> Obviously there was a trade-off: if spurious foundationalism is playing well politically – as indeed any number of things might be – then there are reasons for going along with it.<sup>59</sup>

This discussion exposes the difficulty of operating politically with what we might term today an ‘anti-foundational’ view, or rather more accurately, a view that locates all knowledge within idea-systems that arise in given political, institutional and everyday economic contexts. The kind of malleability that Marx presumed throws very large burdens on activist decision-makers – all the way down to the everyday – and thus circumvents any short-cuts to programmatic organization that could follow from supposed guarantees that particular actions and outcomes are already validated elsewhere and so available as knowledge. But are there really, as I have construed Marx, no guides to action? And no stated goals to achieve? And where does this leave us with respect to a notion of ‘progress’, a concept with which Marx and Engels self-identified and with which their writings were thoroughly imbued?

## Marx, Engels and Progress

Marx seldom used the word 'progress', though in one of his sketches summarizing and explaining his 'outlook' he organized history into various epochs, noting them as 'progressive'.<sup>60</sup> In the twentieth century this sequence became famously controversial, not least because of the ambiguities in Marx's brief remarks. While apparently sequential, 'Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois' modes of production are – with the exception of 'ancient' – overlapping in the present or very recent past, and in any case not clearly distinguished from each other through a common factor, or even a set of identifiable factors explicitly referenced in the text.<sup>61</sup> Marx's briefly sketched typology seems very rough-and-ready, just a stab at distinguishing – in some sense – how different social formations can be in terms of technologies, relationships within productive activities, property systems, monetary circulations (or not) and the like. Further sketches by Marx were in some cases somewhat better organized – e.g. stone age, bronze age, iron age<sup>62</sup> – but again not convincingly sequential in historical terms, or in terms of understanding the various social formations that exist in the present. These typologies come across as heuristic devices, rather than claims following from a specific 'theory' that tells us what history is, how it works and how it will work out.

Engels, from the 1860s, adopted a rather different line, given his repetitive statements of the 'materialist interpretation of history', but always attributing this 'discovery' to Marx. Engels's own historical writings, premised on his knowledge of this truth, were much more argumentative and demonstrative than his theoretical statements. In his own studies he worked deductively from the theory to identify phenomena in history already known to be of major significance, and thus produced historiographies mirroring the politics with which the 'theory' was already imbued. But rather than a rhetoric of persuasion, this kind of writing was a rhetoric of certainty, even when the historical events under consideration, e.g. *The Peasant War in Germany*,<sup>63</sup> did not fulfil his political expectations. Of course the 'materialist interpretation of history' in Engels's hands provided an explanation making up for this: he averred that undeveloped forces of production were such that a communist-driven

democratizing revolution could not possibly have followed. But then this apparent get-out negates the force of the theory: how could such an anti-historical movement have arisen in the first place?

Marx's historical explorations, by contrast, come to a view about possibilities (plural) in relation to human contingency, rather than conclusions from which 'lessons' follow, given the deductive and demonstrative character of such an exercise as done in this contrasting way by Engels. Nonetheless Marx was certainly interested in some political possibilities more than others, and indeed – as a matter of political intervention – helping to make some possibilities intelligible, if they were not already. And he was helping – as a matter of stinging critique – to close off others, for reasons given. This is an orientation that makes Marx's writing activist in an excitingly democratic sense, rather than an authoritarian invocation of knowledge based on epistemological protocols guaranteeing certainty.

Given Marx's activism, there is really no doubt as to what his political values and preferred outcomes were throughout his career. There is also no doubt as to how these views were related to, and crucially dependent on, a view that not all historical changes were of the same significance, and that indeed the development of modern 'bourgeois' production on the basis of modern industrial technologies marked a seismic – and global – change in what humanity was capable of, and what a progressive politics of the time and of the future would have to contend with.

Rather than derive these views from a notion of progress – which would follow from a study of history<sup>64</sup> – Marx's views were derived from his political sense of the 'social question' and the possibilities that democratizing revolutions would be the key to its resolution. This is not a deduction but rather a project, grounded in values that were not widely shared at the time but also not particularly unique to Marx. These values were the worth and dignity of human lives, and in particular an overt rejection of the then commonplace view that lives have a value determined by a hierarchy of economic class and hereditary status. That hierarchy was itself, in Marx's view, largely an effect of a hierarchy of wealth and of access to it via the monetary, commercial, property and kinship systems of the time, or indeed any

time. Notably Marx's outlook also functioned to fend off the racial classifications and evolutionary systems of the period, and the evident links with racialized slavery and colonial projects that also featured in political and intellectual life.<sup>65</sup> While there is little evidence of direct critique, either of the 'scientific' determinisms of the time or of the 'racial sciences' of the time, there is also little evidence that Marx's thinking relied on either. Indeed it was unlikely to, given the characterizations offered above of his activist orientation.<sup>66</sup>

Overwhelmingly a notion of progress comes through in Marx's writings, especially in the *Manifesto*, as a function of the vast change in productivity that he identified with what later writers have called the industrial revolution. It is hard to see how he could have been unhappy with the term, other than to *segue* at once to a demand for the political revolution that in his view would constitute itself through demands to include whole populations, rather than just specific classes, within the scope of its benefits. Those benefits were understood to be highly productive processes through which goods and services could be distributed in ways such that class-based inequalities, and thus the 'social question', would cease to exist. Summing up in the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels wrote:

This is what we have seen so far: the means of production and trade that formed the basis of commercial development were generated in feudal society. At a certain level of development ... the feudal organization of agriculture and small-scale manufacture ... became just so many fetters. They had to be sprung open, they were sprung open. In their place came free competition along with a complementary social and political constitution, the economic and political rule of the commercial class. A similar movement is going on before our very eyes ... [M]odern commercial society, which has conjured up such powerful means of production and trade, resembles the sorcerer who could no longer control the unearthly powers he had summoned forth.<sup>67</sup>

Numerous commentators have taxed Marx not just with Eurocentrism in these views but with a wilful defiance of the downsides to increasing industrialization as it advances across the globe. The *Manifesto* is not a discourse of downsides, except by way



of contrast, and so it is the wrong place to look for more nuanced views. There are notable passages in Marx's writings that discuss the human costs – in individual and collective suffering, in cultural and civilizational obliteration – that the 'bourgeoisie' or commercial classes have unleashed on the world. But given his project – detaching the brutalities of the modern class structure from the productive potential of power-driven technologies – he was hardly likely to recommend a return to some pre-capitalist social formation, folk-craft culture, 'new age' or otherwise utopian rejection of advancing technologies.

It is not difficult to get from Marx and Engels's virtual paeon to the bourgeoisie as earth-movers and planet-shakers in the *Manifesto* to very recent views on industrial pollution as an individual, class-related and global health hazard.<sup>68</sup> But it is certainly true that those views are not explicitly articulated there, as indeed they were not at all prominent until sometime in the 1980s or so, leaving aside those writers who have been discovered since then to have been prophetic. However, it would be difficult to assign to Marx any view about 'fixes' that was not inherently technological and industrially focused, as opposed to simply removing productive forces from use and disavowing labour-saving potentials. While he took a global view, this was a global view of class struggle, and – as we will see – his views on solutions rest on the abolition of classes, rather than on a presumed collectivity of interests within the present structures of national and international economic relationships. The politics of climate change rests very heavily on a rhetoric not just of facts, but of human coincidence deriving from co-residence on just one planet, potentially symbolized in the 'blue marble' image taken from outer space.<sup>69</sup>

This is not to argue that Marx's intellectual strategies to promote mass, democratizing interventions in politics, or even to 'ginger up' networks or proto-parties from what was at the time a 'far left' position, were particularly successful: they were not. As a communist he was branded a revolutionary-in-exile from the 1850s onward, and as a socialist in later years he worked tirelessly in the IWMA. In that way he was rather at a remove from direct interventions into national politics, where he would have had more visibility, and also risked harassment and deportation. His efforts were internationally



directed at national organizations, rather than locally specific to either Britain or the German states. Marx's activity was not the political-party-work that others were doing 'on the ground'. As a part of larger movements and trends, Marx had an effect in some limited ways during his lifetime, but he was ignored or marginalized in others. Unsurprisingly once he was iconized from the 1870s onwards within certain sectors of the socialist movement, and then demonized by other sectors and of course by anti-socialist politicians and movements, his political potency vastly increased. But by then he was something of a symbol, rather than immediately active as a player, and within a decade he was dead.

Marx's progress-producing ideas – construed as political interventions – are the subject of the next chapter.

## Notes

1. G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) represents the high-water mark of this presumption.
2. *EPW* 118; *CW* 5: 5; Thesis 11 in Karl Marx, 'On Feuerbach': 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point is to *change* it'; emphasis in original.
3. *CW* 16: 469; the circumstances are discussed in Carver, *Engels*, ch. 5; the 'theory' is also sometimes termed 'historical materialism'.
4. A much weaker verb in German [*bestimmt*], more akin to 'defined' or 'delimited' or 'specified'.
5. *CW* 16: 469.
6. *LPW* 159; *CW* 29: 262 ('guiding principle').
7. *CW* 16: 469.
8. And much more so than 'economics' or 'communism'.

- [9.](#) As discussed in [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Communism/Socialism’.
- [10.](#) Pre-eminently the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*; LPW 158–62; CW 29: 261–5.
- [11.](#) CW 16: 465–77.
- [12.](#) For a historical study, see James D. White, *The Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).
- [13.](#) These were laws of: the transformation of quality into quantity, unity of opposites, and negation of the negation; all were claimed to be constitutive of a universal matter-in-motion materialism; for discussion, see Carver, *Engels*, chs 5–6.
- [14.](#) For evidence of continuing intellectual revival, see Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method* (Urbana-Champaign: University Illinois Press, 2003); for continuing political revival, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).
- [15.](#) See [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx” ’.
- [16.](#) LPW 159; CW 29: 262.
- [17.](#) Implying activities that are not merely ‘ideas’, as idealists had claimed or implied, rather than object-centred materialisms of matter-in-motion, of which Marx was just as critical in his ‘Theses on Feuerbach’; EPW 116; CW 5: 3.
- [18.](#) Marx's generalizations here are not termed *Theorie*.
- [19.](#) For various lines of analysis and criticism, see Terrell Carver and Paul Thomas (eds), *Rational Choice Marxism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1995).
- [20.](#) A formulaic phrase that occurs in neither Hegel nor Marx nor Engels; see the discussion in Carver, *Marx's Social Theory*, p. 46.

- [21.](#) Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), half-title verso.
- [22.](#) Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, half-title verso.
- [23.](#) Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, pp. 134, 152.
- [24.](#) For citation and discussion of these terms and claims, see Holt, *Social Thought of Karl Marx*, ch. 5 ('Historical Materialism'), pp. 121–52.
- [25.](#) G. A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom: Themes from Marx* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 132.
- [26.](#) Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* launched a profound critique of prior philosophies of science, and indeed of having a 'philosophy' of science.
- [27.](#) For a brief but helpful overview, see Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); see Carver, *Postmodern Marx*, for a reading that takes the approach.
- [28.](#) As discussed in [Chapter 1](#) 'Making Marx "Marx" '.
- [29.](#) CW 7: 3–7; the flysheet 'Demands', taken from the *Communist Manifesto* (and co-signed by Marx, Engels and four associates), was printed in Paris and circulated throughout the German states during 1848.
- [30.](#) On the exclusion of material that was 'too theoretical' from *ad hominem* polemic of 1845–6, see Carver and Blank, *Marx and Engels's 'German Ideology' Manuscripts*, pp. 3–4, 29–31.
- [31.](#) See [Chapter 1](#) 'Making Marx "Marx" '.
- [32.](#) [*Die Lage der Arbeitenden Klasse in England*]; CW 4: 295–583; later re-published in 1892 with 'in 1844' added to the title, since the content had become historical.
- [33.](#) For an overview on the 'everyday' see Piotr Sztompka, 'The Focus on Everyday Life: A New Turn in Sociology', *European Review* 16 (2008): 1–15.

34. Which is not to say that these views have died out, given the resurgence of anti-industrial, 'eco' and indigenous (or indigenous-inspired) movements and experimentation resulting from concerns with pollution and climate-change; for a textual and contextual discussion of an apparent and commonly quoted link between communist society as envisaged by Marx and small-scale, amateurism in production, see Carver, *Postmodern Marx*, ch. 5, where close attention to manuscript materials resolves the paradox.
35. CW 23: 174–5; see [Chapter 1](#) 'Making Marx "Marx" '.
36. See *Manifesto* section IV; LPW 1, 20–9; CW 6: 482, 507–17; and see [Chapter 2](#) 'Class Struggle and Class Compromise'.
37. For a brief and definitional account of globalization, see Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
38. LPW 6; CW 6: 489; for a novel visualization of the text, see the brilliant 'Communist Manifestoon'  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbTIJ9\\_bLP4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbTIJ9_bLP4)
39. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
40. LPW 18; CW 6: 503; in formulaic constructions of Marx's 'thought' (and of Marxisms) this simple sentence ranks as a major element of a 'theory of ideology' (notwithstanding the fact that 'ideology' is not mentioned in the *Manifesto*).
41. The British Museum's 2010 exhibition and book 'A History of the World in 100 Objects' reflects this kind of view, though the collection was by no means focused on objects in the 'everyday' sense that are produced by and for 'everyday' lives.  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_world.aspx](https://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a_history_of_the_world.aspx); this artefactual approach to historical change is vividly illustrated in Chapter VII 'The Labour Process ...' and in the blockbuster Chapter XV 'Machinery and Modern Industry' in

Marx's published masterwork *Capital*, vol. 1 (CW 35: 187–208; 374–508).

- 42. There are links here to women's history and women's studies (though not explicitly made by Marx and Engels). This focus on the 'everyday' and 'Every(Wo)Man' can be pursued quite independently of what is usually perceived as distinctively 'Marxist'.
- 43. As mentioned above, this attribution of 'determinism' to Marx rests to some extent on English translation of a quite weak German verb; cf. *LPW* 160 ('specifies') vs *CW*: 29: 263 ('determines').
- 44. Rousseau's 'Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men', published in 1755, is a striking precursor and presumed influence.
- 45. *LPW* 2: *CW* 6: 482.
- 46. For an exposition of this view, see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2014 [1985]).
- 47. *LPW* 11; *CW* 6: 495.
- 48. For an introduction to the 'Marx and human nature' debate, see Sean Sayers, *Marxism and Human Nature* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2007 [1998]).
- 49. [*Umrisse zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*]; *CW* 3: 418–43.
- 50. See Terrell Carver, *Texts on Method* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), p. 12.
- 51. *LPW* 2; *CW* 6: 485.
- 52. First published in English as an extract from the then untranslated German-language *Grundrisse* manuscript collection: Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, trans. Jack Cohen, ed. Eric Hobsbawm (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964).

- [53.](#) For an introduction to Marxist historiography, see Larry Patriquin (ed.), *The Ellen Meiksins Wood Reader* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013); Holt treats the ‘theory’ in this fashion, *Karl Marx*, ch. 5 ‘Historical Materialism’.
- [54.](#) Other than ‘mob’ interventions into ‘high’ politics.
- [55.](#) As recorded by ‘Captain Prescott’ in his histories of the Spanish conquests of Mexico and Peru; William H. Prescott, *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* (New York, 1843) and *A History of the Conquest of Peru* (New York, 1847).
- [56.](#) [*Der Achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonapartes*]; *LPW* 31–127; *CW* 11: 99–197.
- [57.](#) Various collected in *CW* 19; 20; 21.
- [58.](#) See the discussion of Marx’s ‘Notes on Adolph Wagner’, the last manuscript notes he made, in Carver, *Texts on Method*, pp. 161–78.
- [59.](#) Engels’s late forays into Darwinism represent a similar move, but the response was similar standoffishness from Marx, notwithstanding attempts by Engels and later commentators to construct an implied endorsement.
- [60.](#) *LPW* 160; *CW* 29: 263.
- [61.](#) For a detailed analysis, see Terrell Carver, *Marx’s Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); for a contrary approach, see Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, *passim*.
- [62.](#) *CW* 35: 190 n.
- [63.](#) [*Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*]; *CW* 10: 397–482.
- [64.](#) Which is what the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel purported to do.
- [65.](#) For thoughtful and scholarly research and critique along these lines, see Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

66. Though given the implied and explicit determinisms attributed by Engels to Marx (from 1859 onwards) a number of ‘hostages to fortune’ then pop up in Marx's texts, ranging from (quite rare) mentions of physical and biological sciences to Hegelianisms (negation of the negation) to English mistranslations noted above.
67. *LPW* 6; *CW* 8: 489; translation slightly altered, substituting ‘commercial’ for ‘bourgeois/ie’; note that such passages track Marx's early journalistic engagements with similar feudal-to-modern economic phenomena; see [Chapter 2](#) ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’.
68. See Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx and Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, forthcoming 2017).
69. <http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/view.php?id=57723>



## 4

# Democracy and Communism/Socialism

Since classical times democracy – meaning ‘rule by the people’ – has been a much despised concept, variously signifying rule by ‘the mob’, the unqualified, the poor or ‘rabble’, and generally an invitation to chaos. Historically ‘republican’ rule (meaning rule without dictatorship/kingship or autocratic religious authority) has been avowedly elitist, constructing committee-like institutions for small groups to ‘share in ruling and being ruled’, as Aristotle put it.<sup>1</sup> The classical ‘balanced constitution’ (or ‘mixed constitution’) dating from Roman republican times allowed for elite rule – whether selection was by family, property, or wealth – in a senate or similar body, tempered by some limited institutions through which male ‘others’ in the community at large could be heard via recognized representatives, rather than through riots, though these were often supplementary. And it also provided for some day-to-day – or alternatively emergency – powers of legal execution through which laws could be enforced and offenders dealt with judicially. So in that way republican constitutions licensed an executive person or persons with some independence from the legislative decision-makers. The trick, of course, was in controlling this independence, particularly when the executive – or even a temporary dictator – acts as sole and permanent ruler, defying the sovereignty of the legislative elite.<sup>2</sup>

In general, modern parliamentary systems have evolved through derogations of power from monarchs (almost always granted under duress), from seizures of power that abolished monarchies (through revolutionary republicanism), and from the imposition of democratic constitutional systems by victors on the vanquished (after wars, conflicts or interventions). The classical ‘balanced constitution’ has contributed various elements in varying degrees to these state-building exercises, often instituting popular assemblies (of ‘the people’ and therefore constituting ‘the nation’) sharing sovereignty in various ways with a ‘second chamber’, somewhat mimicking the elitism of the Roman senate and intended as a ‘check’ on the popular

will. While there are endless variations on these themes, the American model of 1787 added three ingredients to the mix: a clear declaration of popular sovereignty as a point of origin rather than, and as opposed to, monarchical sovereignty extended downwards ('We the people ...')<sup>3</sup>; a clear separation of powers into legislative, executive and judicial institutional 'branches' of government; and notably and consistently, a principle and practice of judicial independence, in particular from legislative and executive 'interference' and extra-constitutional arrogations of power.

Historically the movement towards popular sovereignty, i.e. away from monarchical or theocratic sovereignty, has been violent, rather than peaceful. It has frequently involved national liberation, anti-imperial, anti-colonial and anti-foreign nationalisms, and national projects of foundation or renewal, often involving foreign interventions and local civil wars. In the last 450 years or so anti-democratic movements have been just as popular as pro-democracy movements, often more so, and counter-revolutions have often been just as successful as democratic ones. Democracy as a global – and globalizing – template for humanity is a post Second World War phenomenon, as is the Great Power politics that declares its ultimate worth and expunges what are – and are said to be – its rivals and enemies. And of course democracy is not so much a 'what' question as a 'how much' question, given the complexity of varying procedures and institutions through which it is constituted.<sup>4</sup> It is also a 'who' question, and very often a 'what to do when it goes wrong' question. There are any number of angles to take in addressing these questions, and any amount of tinkering, reforming, rewriting and renewing the institutional frameworks that are constantly underway, if we take a global perspective.

## **Politics and Economics of the 'Social Question'**

While the catch-phrase, 'It's the economy, stupid!' derives from 1992 US presidential campaign specifics, it caught on because it references a truism: that post Second World War elected governments must manage the economy, or else anger the voters and fail at the polls.

Even if the stated policy is to back off from economic management, or perhaps a claim to abjure this entirely through privatizing and de-regulating strategies, the implication then is not that the economy is not important, but rather to acknowledge how important it is. The development of this focus – not so much on how politics works, but on what it should do – is very much to Marx's credit, even if his name is not attached to such a generic idea, and even though he was not the only one to think along these lines. Marx's obscurity in relation to this fundamental political change shouldn't mask his importance. Nor should his contribution to, and understanding of, the circumstances of industrial modernity be limited to what he self-consciously picked out as distinctive to himself, or to what others have picked out on his behalf. About himself he commented in correspondence that:

What I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular historical phases in the development of production, (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat, (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.<sup>5</sup>

However, rather than follow through this typology, which is indeed distinctively Marxian, it is rather more to our purposes to consider Marx's political activism in relation to the democratizing movements of the day. This approach involves examining the movements to which he aligned himself and considering how exactly his thinking about 'the economy' figured in these writings and thus in his politics. It also entails some discussion as to how 'dictatorship of the proletariat' could fit in with democracy at all.

First of all, though, we need to get a sense of what 'it' would be in the catch-phrase if 'it' *were not* 'the economy'. We would need to ask what, in that case, would instead be the most significant areas of concern for a polity and for its politicians? Today it is difficult to imagine a politics in which 'the economy' was not the dominant issue, on the assumption that that is government's job, and indeed some governments are sovereign wealth funds in their own right. And even when economic goals are sacrificed to other goals, through governmental actions or other means (such as referendums), those

sacrifices are presumed important and have to be considered very carefully. Rolling the clock back to Marx's time, however, the notion that there was an 'economy', other than the royal treasury, for 'the government' to manage, and that the management of this was somehow 'for the people', would have been a strange one in most quarters, and overtly treasonous in some, most especially east of the Rhine.

Royal treasuries managed taxation or tribute to the benefit of the royal or otherwise ruling household, its military forces, its favoured courtiers and 'pensioners' and the like. Charitable giving and church institutions addressed poverty, hardship and suffering among the 'poor' – or did not. By the early nineteenth century the 'social question' had arisen precisely to make such matters of 'public interest', and to appeal to 'the public' as having an 'interest' was a fundamentally democratizing move, precisely because it did not come from the royal or princely court. Raising the 'social question' implied that among the people, but certainly not all of them – given the hierarchies of wealth, education, gender and race – there was a claim to political rights and participation other than finding a position high up in privileged circles. There are still some nations that operate in this way today, though not many, and they rely very heavily on marketing national resources (such as oil), rather than on taxation and/or conquest, as pre-modern regimes generally did.

From 1842 Marx was squarely on-side with asking the 'social question' and using (barely) legal means for an answer. But this raises a number of biographical puzzles in relation to individuals, and indeed these are puzzles today: not everyone is a left-leaning 'liberal' or social democrat, or even concerned with 'the economy' as the first and foremost issue in politics, since there are other values and other battles, e.g. national sovereignty, women's reproductive rights, civil rights, same-sex marriage, overseas interventions, racial purity and religious conformity.

Why should Marx have taken up the 'social question', given that others in his family and among his friends did not? Looking at Marx's life up to 1842 biographers point to the history of his native Rhineland under Napoleonic conquest and provincial rule, a period when the 'rights of man and the citizen', passed by the revolutionary

national assembly of France in 1789, were introduced. As a result, certain areas of religious discrimination were abolished (e.g. Christian confession as a test for entry to university and into the professions), and a representative – albeit consultative – ‘Diet’ or assembly was introduced, though chosen from among a very narrow electorate of sorts.<sup>6</sup>

While the values behind these reforms were clearly those of a quite limited version of popular sovereignty, the institutions were not generated initially through local politics, but rather through foreign conquest. The focus in the Napoleonic period was on taxation and conscription for French national goals, not on redistributive spending or market interventions in relation to the poor or anyone else. These kinds of governmental interventions and policies would not have made sense conceptually at the time, though charity and ‘poor relief’ for indigent individuals and families would have been readily understood and were doubtless practised. The Confederation of the Rhineland was wound up after the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, though in some liberal circles the memories and values persisted. Both Marx’s father and future father-in-law were known locally – and to the police – to have rather mild liberal views and sympathies.<sup>7</sup>

In Trier Marx had a classical education, followed by some interest in ‘jurisprudence ... philosophy and history’<sup>8</sup> when he was a university undergraduate.<sup>9</sup> His liberalizing ‘free-thinking’ ideas of the time were directed, so far as we know, towards intellectual defences of free expression, chiefly in the critique of religion, and therefore of religious establishments, and therefore of the divinely sanctioned monarchical principles and institutions of the German states. This was all very radical, clearly inspired by the rationalist ideals of the French Revolution and certainly democratizing in the way that it side-lined court politics and centred middle-class male intellectuals, office-holders and legal professionals. But this is not yet the ‘social question’ nor do economic issues arise as politically the most pertinent, from what we know.

Biographers have usually not put the issue of the ‘social question’ in relation to Marx as sharply as this, and have generally relied on appeals to the Enlightenment scepticism and French anti-clericalism current in Trier’s liberal (and anti-Prussian) intelligentsia.

Parenthetically it is worth noting that Engels's 'road' to much the same 'outlook'<sup>10</sup> began in nothing like the circumstances we have just surveyed. Engels grew up in what is now Wuppertal, an area that began industrializing (in textile processing) in the early eighteenth century, during which time the Engels family operated over successive generations as factory-owners and business entrepreneurs. The local Protestant sect, of which the Engels family were stalwarts, was the Pietist form of Protestantism, i.e. biblically fundamentalist and suspicious of secular texts, even if classical. In political terms Pietists were certainly hostile to the anti-faith, pro-rationalist republicanism of the French Revolution. In short Engels emerged from the industrial and conservative Wupper Valley, a situation that was almost opposite to the vine-growing liberalism of Trier, comparatively speaking, that was Marx's immediate background.<sup>11</sup>

Marx himself, in an autobiographical sketch, appealed to his newspaper work on the *Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne as his personal and practical introduction to 'material interests', meaning economic concerns.<sup>12</sup> These concerns were by definition 'of the people', since the Prussian court's concern was with taxation for its own purposes, not the public's. While Marx does not personally credit these liberal and liberalizing individuals, who owned and ran the newspaper, with making a profound difference in his life, we know who they were, and in what their interests consisted. They were businessmen, concerned with a stable workforce and commercial relationships; an unstable 'rabble' of landless labourers, trespassing out of desperation, and ineligible even for charitable poor relief, was not to their liking.<sup>13</sup> But possibly there is also a clue here in Engels's 'road' to 'the social question', since from the age of sixteen he had been put into the family firm in various locations, e.g. Bremen and Manchester, to learn the business, and in doing that, he went to see the factories, to view the poor and to wonder – along with others, notably in England – what could be done to reorient governments to view these phenomena as a problem for 'the state'.<sup>14</sup>

Possibly biographers tend to miss or undervalue this particular turning point in Marx's thinking.<sup>15</sup> This is because they see Marx as an intellectual since his texts – even the newspaper ones – emerge



with that style and diction and are highly convoluted and bookish. As mentioned above, censorship had something to do with this, as did the presumption that his readership would be limited to an elite, though how many really got much out of Marx's highly academic style is debatable. Marx's questions, enquiries and discussions on 'material interests', as they took place among his editorial colleagues, are not really recorded, though there seems to have been an interesting area of coincidence. Turning back, for a moment, to Engels's more practical case, the younger man had essentially no academic qualifications in the first place, so these kinds of business contacts were simply what he was used to. The writing that he did – critical as it was – fitted into a kind of journalistic diction rather more familiar to Anglophone biographers and audiences, and indeed some of it was in English anyway. The two men's somewhat different 'roads' to a common political project look like converging in and through a milieu where 'material interests' were to the fore.

We do not have Engels's early reading notes on the political economists or a very good picture of how exactly his 1843 'Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy' emerged as a draft for Marx's attention, other than a supposition that Chetham's Library in Manchester was probably important, since it was a haunt of his. And it was certainly important in his later 'must-go' trip to take Marx there in 1845.<sup>16</sup> Engels could read English perfectly, and economic discourse was certainly familiar to him. In a sense he was very well 'prepped' to take a critical view of political economy, and indeed there were numerous critical attacks on it circulating in and around Chartist sources and amongst other 'reformers' in the north of England.

## **Political Encounters of a Philosophical Kind**

For most Anglophone biographers, then, it is something of a relief that after the closure of the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1843, Marx the intellectual 'retreats' to a study and tackles Hegel, and properly this time, as opposed to romanticizing encounters in his student days. But then, as some have noted, and as Marx himself says, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* was a German-language short-cut to at least some of the basics of political economy, given Hegel's concern with



society as a structure, though not with a reform-minded ‘social question’ making poverty – rather than overall order and stability – the major issue. And we know that Marx had Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* to hand in French.<sup>17</sup>

Marx was very good at philosophy, very astute in engaging with Hegel's continuing role in the rarefied world of Prussian court and university politics and therefore – and very evidently – reading Hegel's thought and work as a story of change and malleability, rather than as a philosophy that simply validated Prussia-centric authoritarianism. The draft ‘Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right’ (published only in 1932) is an impressive work,<sup>18</sup> inspiring very detailed commentary since the 1960s. But this focus on what Marx said, and how it fits with ‘his thought’, generally omits a really serious consideration of the exact political thrust: what was he *doing*? Marx's published ‘Introduction’ to this critique provides a startling answer, and it tells us a great deal about how – in his context, rather than ours – he addressed the ‘social question’. He did this in connection with democratization, such that the two converged as social revolution. In Marx's conception social revolution was institutionally political, on the model of the French Revolution, but also determinedly economic in substance, and so a considerable step further along the democratic road than any revolution had gone as yet.

Rather than read Marx's published ‘Introduction’<sup>19</sup> as a critical work about Hegel, I propose to examine it here as a work about Marx himself, picking up the continuities clearly expressed there with his activism in co-editing the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* of 1844, which contained this explosive ‘Introduction’ to his critique of Hegel's work on society and state. This slim volume was banned in Germany, generating arrest warrants against himself and others. Notably Marx's co-editor on the project was Arnold Ruge, whose experiences as a university radical entering into liberal (i.e. revolutionary) journalism pre-figured Marx's own trajectory. Ruge's *Hallische Jahrbücher* had been suppressed by the Kingdom of Saxony in 1843, and he left Halle for Paris, moving on to Switzerland, where the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* itself was printed up for smuggling into the German states.<sup>20</sup>

Generally speaking, commentators and biographers have worked on explicating Marx's method as a Young Hegelian – which was to invert Hegel's assertions and thus to attack philosophical idealism – and/or they have highlighted his programmatic conclusion that the ‘proletariat’ is the ‘heart’ of a radicalizing ‘philosophy’ that will – when realized – emancipate ‘the human being’.<sup>21</sup> There has been considerable interest in where and how Marx adopted this term ‘proletariat’ from French, and how – empirically – it had so little visible referent in Germany, or even in France. Even in Britain industrial workers, though highly visible in certain manufacturing areas, were a minority of the general population, most of which was still employed in agricultural production. But it is rather more interesting here for us to follow what Marx says about the ‘social question’, seeing just how his discussion is structured around this point of departure for the practicalities of his activism.

This now famous but very brief ‘Introduction’ was little-noticed at the time of publication, not least because most copies of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* were seized by the Prussian police. The text was only widely circulated in the 1960s and has been much re-published since. This popularity was in large part owing to its brevity as a readable instance of Marx's critique of a famous philosopher, Hegel, and to its claim to be the earliest instance of his ‘doctrine’ of proletarian revolution, since it records the first time he used the exact word in print. In later years, of course, the term ‘proletariat’ was made famous and iconically ‘Marx-ist’ by the re-publication of the *Manifesto*, as noted above, where it figures in the sub-heading for section I (‘Bourgeois and proletarians’) and section II (‘Proletarians and communists’). However, as a prelude to parsing the text politically in a less overdetermined way, let us first engage with the little-read ‘Letters’ between Marx and Ruge,<sup>22</sup> also featuring in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*. These were first published in English in 1967.

The immediate message that one gets from these letters is the authors’ utter disdain for the Prussian government, saying that it has cast off any recent vestige of liberalism and made its naked ‘despotism’ visible to the world, thus exhibiting what Marx – in his opening letter – describes as its national shame. This is something that other countries on the international stage are judging harshly,

he comments. The German 'state system' is said by Marx to be an 'abnormity', a 'ship of fools' and a 'harlequinade', though the 'miserable' German people have not perceived this yet, in his estimation.<sup>23</sup> The two authors, Marx and Ruge, in their open letters agree in bemoaning the recently revoked 'reforms' of the new king Friedrich Wilhelm IV as an act symptomatic of the 'old regime', and they view the monarch as persisting now with Prussian hostility to the liberalizing ideas of the French Revolution. They thus see him – against some initial expectations of reform at his accession – as totally opposed to a political system that would turn abjected slaves into emancipated human beings, which was what Marx and Ruge were ultimately advocating.<sup>24</sup>

In his response to Ruge's letter in the exchange, Marx says succinctly that the 'atmosphere here [in Germany] makes one a serf'. After that he generates a discussion of what to do about this, which should sound remarkably familiar and remarkably practical, at least as an 'outlook' on how to set political goals and accomplish them. Noting that 'philosophy has become mundane', rather than abstract and rarefied, Marx celebrates this mundanity by saying that philosophy has 'been drawn into the torment of the struggle'.<sup>25</sup> But struggle *with what* and *over what*? His answer is that 'critical philosophy' – not unlike the critical theory<sup>26</sup> current in academia today – should orient itself towards struggles over the 'political state' and thus to function as a 'register of the practical struggles of mankind'. In terms of state-struggles the conflict for Marx lies between 'a system based on social estate' (i.e. monarchical medievalism) and one 'based on representation' (i.e. democratizing constitutionalism).<sup>27</sup> But he swiftly relates this view to the 'social question', which he puts into the terms of a very basic, but highly politicized political economy: the 'question' of the state 'only expresses in a *political* way the difference between rule by man and rule by private property'.<sup>28</sup> The contrast generated here by Marx reflects a twofold conclusion: the resolution of 'the social question' is not coincident simply with the establishment of representative institutions; rather a resolution must 'get into' struggles within the economy, as we might say today.

So then, as Marx says, 'the question arises: how are we to set about it?' Again a twofold conclusion follows: seize current issues, in this

case, the critique of religious institutions and of monarchist politics, ‘in whatever form they exist’, and then confront these issues, not with a ready-made dogma but with a principle. The latter activity then requires a distinction between varieties of communisms, those taught by various writers as doctrine, and alternatively a socialist or humanistic principle outlining ‘the *reality* of the true human being’.<sup>29</sup>

Of course addressing this concept at length would generate a self-contradiction: Marx would be enunciating, say in the manner of Étienne Cabet (1788–1856), whom he quotes, another ‘ready-made’ or ‘one-sided’ system. Marx casts his revolutionary reader as a critic attuned to reason, getting his German contemporaries on board with these struggles in the enlightened way that he sets out: ‘In analysing the superiority of the representative system over the social-estate system, the critic *in a practical way wins the interest* of a large party.’ This partisan interest, as Marx states, is in the role of private property, which – again in Marx’s succinct view – is the ‘[private] property system’, the antithesis of communism, which – in his abstract conflation – is the humanist or socialist principle if, and when, this is properly realized.<sup>30</sup> Marx’s published ‘Introduction’ puts this position in more detail in intellectual terms, but what is interesting here is how he develops a brief but quite explicit strategy for, and understanding of, political activism that almost anyone in the Occupy movement, or involved similar sorts of activisms, could readily understand.

Note that Marx’s ‘Introduction’ to a critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* says practically nothing about Hegel. This might seem puzzling now, but probably was not in 1843 when he wrote it. Hegel, Hegelian philosophy and in particular Hegel’s philosophy of society, state, rights and law was a metaphor for both the ‘old regime’ of the conservative Prussian monarchy and for the liberalizing, democratizing critics such as Marx, in so far as they could say anything much about the ‘old regime’ in print. But Hegel was more than a metaphor, in that his philosophy was a political issue – even a political football, to use the modern image – for both sides, conservatives and reformers. This was because the monarchy had appointed its ‘old Hegelian’ candidates to important university chairs, i.e. philosophers who would lecture on Hegel’s texts, and on

other texts in the pedagogical canon, and then draw conclusions that supported authoritarianism and hierarchy.<sup>31</sup> These conclusions, drawn philosophically, would then rule out notions that those who were not of the elites, or not chosen by the elites, should participate in any substantive, let alone constitutional way in decision-making, or in decisions about where governmental decision-making is appropriate, or not.

Hence Marx's critique of Hegel in published form was not a philosophical one, as later commentators conceived it, but a critique of a current politics that was heavily endorsed by the Prussian government as a particular kind of philosophizing, and indeed not just for its supposed political content, but also for its medium – elite philosophy faculties at elite universities. As a democratizing activist Marx excoriated both, arguing that for radicals philosophy was not a practical political activity, and to pursue it as if it were a practical activity constituted a serious illusion and reprehensible displacement. And it goes without saying that Marx ridiculed the political messages that the 'old regime' was serving up through this deception, namely that philosophers were just the sort of 'wise heads' to give 'traditional' ideas further credence over against the modernizing realities – political and industrial – that Marx talked up that were occurring in other countries. As Marx says in his text: 'The following exposition ... [deals] ... with the German *philosophy* of the state and of right, simply because it deals with *Germany*.'<sup>32</sup>

Marx's notion of criticism – his apparent moniker for activism – is not remotely philosophical, and is intentionally terrifying to readers. Declaring that German society was anachronistically avoiding the modern world and burying itself in an imaginary teutonic past, Marx proposes a criticism consisting of '*hand-to-hand combat*': 'The nation must be taught to be *terrified* of itself in order to give it *courage*', he writes. Interestingly there is a lesson from Marx for other countries as well: 'The struggle against the German political present is the struggle against the past of the modern nations, who are still continually troubled by the reminiscences of that past.'<sup>33</sup> So the conflict here – between authoritarian conservatism and modernizing liberalism – is a general one – it is just that Marx sees the German situation as laggard and pathetic.



Marx's conclusion in this text is that criticism can do only so much against the German *status quo*, precisely because 'truly human problems' are not yet arising in such a backward country. 'The relation of industry, of the world of wealth in general, to the political world is one of the major problems of modern times.' Warming to this line of thought, Marx takes a swipe at Germany's own political economist, Friedrich List (1789–1846), though not by name, precisely because in his work (as Marx reads it) List collapses the development of modern industry and wealth-creation in Germany into a vision rooted in German patriotism, i.e. a *Nationalökonomie*, not the kind of international perspective on social change that drives Marx's narrative forward. 'While', Marx says, 'in France and England the problem reads: *political economy* or the *mastery of society over wealth*', or in other words, a democratizing public in France and England is setting the 'social question' up in politics as the problem of the day, something that – according to Marx – German rulers, local political economists and would-be democratizing radicals are simply failing to grasp.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, according to Marx, '*German governments ... combine the civilized deficiencies of the modern political world, whose advantages we do not enjoy, with the barbaric deficiencies of the ancien régime, which we enjoy in full measure.*' This includes the German commercial classes or 'bourgeoisie', which – as Marx avers – had played a revolutionary role in democratizing France by overthrowing the monarchy and instituting government by a national assembly. In representative terms this assembly was of the 'third estate' i.e. 'the people' – albeit selective by class and gender. Marx's view of the '*German middle class*' in his own time was unflattering: it is 'the general representative of the philistine mediocrity of all the other classes'.<sup>35</sup> And reasoning speculatively, rather than sociologically, Marx fixes on the 'proletariat', which 'is only beginning to appear in Germany as a result of the *industrial* development taking place', as its counterpart and ultimate opponent.<sup>36</sup>

However, any hortatory call for radical reform is necessarily speculative, and in formal terms constative, rather than referential. Marx's published 'Introduction' treats the proletariat as a

performative: calling on it rhetorically will help to constitute it – and, rather in defiance of his sweeping condemnation of German backwardness – he sees industrialization taking off in his native country. And with that would come the marketization of labour and of employment, so ‘the artificially impoverished’ – not the ‘naturally arising poor’ characteristic of the old order – would begin to pose the ‘social question’ themselves. Here the activating link, as Marx puts the matter, is between the dissolution of the former ‘middle estate’ of small traders, small producers and small distributors who will be cast into the factories, and the newly forming proletariat, whose numbers will consequently increase. In this process, so the reasoning goes, the ‘social question’ of reorganizing society around principles of human emancipation will arise, precisely because it will be obvious that ‘artificial’ social forces, rather than natural forces (as in the old order's portrayal of itself), will pose not only the ‘social question’ but also perform a social solution.<sup>37</sup>

## Coalitions with Commercialisms

So far this argument merely states a kind of social malleability – and social responsibility – that anyone recognizing the ‘social question’ today could easily slot into. Indeed not slotting into this outlook on social issues and governmental responsibilities would simply erase the ‘social question’, or convert it into something other than an engagement with the economy. Alternatives today – as in Marx's time – include various forms of religious authoritarianism. These aim to enforce moral values derived from tradition, and claim a value superior to economic considerations. Characteristically such regimes and movements work specifically to curtail modern or secular or ‘Western’ economic incursions into social life as a matter of public policy. Another familiar alternative today is ethno-nationalism as a project, sometimes to the point of near-isolation from the international economy, often but not always a project of military dictatorships. There are also a few monarchies remaining today that resist democratization, understood as the requirement that government is derived from, and responsible to, ‘the people’ through representative institutions – and indeed that government is illegitimate if it does not. These comparisons should tell us that Marx



was 'on the money' in identifying a common thread in revolutionary projects to democratize government by opening it out to commercial elites (as opposed to royal and court elites) and to institute commercial economies involving 'private' (i.e. non-state) investment of wealth and employment of 'free' (i.e. de-feudalized) labour, generally summed up by the slogans 'free market' and 'free trade'.

Since Marx's time very strong claims have been made within the libertarian tradition that commercialism and democracy are coincident and that pulling them apart constitutes an injustice to individuals as well as generating inefficiencies in the economy. Contrarily very strong claims have been made within the social-democratic tradition that commercialism and market forces generate considerable injustices that are experienced by individuals in heritable class terms, so democratic institutions have obligations to act as regulators and agencies of income and wealth generation and distribution. It is one thing having a strategy to perform democratization by generating public concern with economic issues, and another to balance the competing political philosophies and substantive claims to some point of 'success'. Marx strongly identified himself with an ultimate goal: communism as the institution of an industrial, but classless society, which – in his reasoning – would entail the abolition of money. This was a conception familiar to him from utopian writings of the period, his own criticisms of these various writers notwithstanding. However, an examination of Marx's activism reveals how this long-term view framed more immediate goals and local projects. These activisms took place chiefly in Brussels, where Marx was resident 1845–7, having been pushed into exile from the German states.

Marx engaged in coalition-building with the necessarily class-specific individuals and opportunities that arose and were accessible to a German *émigré* radical and his confrères. These were notably a middle-class, commercially minded Democratic Committee, holding somewhat public meetings in the local French language and circulating literatures that promoted further expansion of the franchise and public engagement with political decision-making.<sup>38</sup> Belgium as an independent constitutional monarchy was itself a product of a democratizing revolution in 1830, overthrowing the post-Napoleonic monarchical restorations in the Low Countries and

sparking a similar revolution the same year in France. Marx's engagement with French Revolutionary ideals was arguably more of this revolution than directly derived from the experiences of 1789–93. Historical writing on the latter – other than horrified condemnation – would not have been possible in the German states, whereas the former was in a sense a current event, having taken place within Marx's early youth when he was twelve.

The ideals of this period were an expansion of the franchise, which had been restricted under previously restored monarchies to elites participating in advisory diets or assemblies; a removal of trade-barriers and proscriptions, guilds and guild-like restrictions in production; and positive promotion of commercial enterprise as a matter of right and human liberation. It is important to note that prior to 1830 hardly anyone in Europe voted – even in some fashion – for anything, and that monarchs paraded their claims to personal sovereignty as a matter of divine right, even if their sovereignty was not in practice utterly absolute. Even after the revolutions of 1830, and even after the Great Reform Bill of 1832 in England, the franchise was little expanded and included only a very select few among educated and propertied males. Marx's commercial-liberal friends in Brussels were very like the backers of the *Rheinische Zeitung* with whom he had associated in Cologne, and whose 'material' interests intrigued him so much and with so much effect. His 'Discourse on Free Trade'<sup>39</sup> – now rarely cited, even by those interested in his 'economics' – represents an important work of activism from this period, and in this kind of democratizing engagement. The *Discourse* was written in French for the locals and was specifically mentioned by Marx in his brief auto-bibliography of 1859.<sup>40</sup>

However, further examination of the historical record – as we now have it – shows considerable activist collaboration between Marx and Engels on the subject of 'free trade'. This work done by the two brings out what the issues were at the time and the fact that they persist today, arguably quite magnified, especially considering the glaring global inequalities in national gross domestic products (GDPs) and local living standards, and the global migrations of labourers using – one way or another – modern means of transport in order to obtain better wages and living standards. Free trade vs

protectionism was a lively topic in commercial Brussels and in the local French-language press, and – importantly for the pair – also in the German-language *émigré* press based there. This was the *Deutsche-Brüsseler Zeitung*, in which Engels wrote up a ‘Free Trade Congress at Brussels’ (16–18 September 1847), recording two days of (in his view) lacklustre and formulaic debate on whether free trade would benefit ‘the world’.<sup>41</sup>

The debate, so Engels said, was pretty much uninformed by what he himself considered to be a proper appreciation of classic and current works of political economy. In effect Engels recorded a rally against economic protectionism that was attended by ‘political economists, manufacturers, tradesmen, etc.’, both local and visiting, mainly English and French, but no commercial ‘free trader’ from Germany itself.<sup>42</sup> The discussion on day three was the one that attracted his attention – and that he presumes is the one interesting his readers – namely, will ‘universal Free Trade benefit the working classes?’ Engels’s German friend and sometime Yorkshire resident, the poet Georg Weerth (1822–56), spoke against a presumption that the ‘protective system’ of tariffs and exclusions would benefit the working classes, and also against a deduction that free trade would ‘change their miserable condition’.<sup>43</sup>

Though unable to speak at the Congress (yet reported in Engels’s article), Marx had a more nuanced ‘take’ on these familiar issues. His text was recovered in the twentieth century in a German translation from a lost French original, and in that speech he concerned himself with the political programme of the protectionists, which he located in two schools. The followers of List, he said, advocate tariffs only to protect large-scale industries, not – as some might think – small-scale handicrafts and enterprises, and thus working-class employment. List’s position, according to Marx, in fact sacrifices working-class employment and living standards to industrial progress, which is advancing globally. The followers of another German political economist, Gustav von Gülich (1791–1847), by contrast, advocate total prohibitions on the importation of some products, high tariffs on others, as well as high taxes on industrial machinery, in order to protect handicraft production. As a

protectionist von Gülich claimed that these policies and principles would benefit the working classes.<sup>44</sup>

Swiftly taking both schools to task for their introverted nationalism, Marx writes that it is no great advantage being 'exploited by one's fellow-countrymen' rather than 'by foreigners'. The last refuge of both, he says, is the claim that they preserve the nation, one way or another, as the only route to social reform, which must necessarily be independent of the economic system. Marx exposes a contradiction: given that both systems claim to enable the accumulation of commercial wealth as capital, how then does that strength turn to weakness such that 'capital ... could be a philanthropist'?<sup>45</sup> He offers two generalizations that are still debating points relevant to the 'social question' as it persists today. The first is a provocative thesis in political theory and social activism: 'In general, social reforms can never be brought about by the weakness of the stronger; they must and will be called to life by the strength of the weak.' The other relates to the status of the 'social question' in politics at all: if the 'social question' is not to be resolved within the economic structures of society, as national protectionists were arguing, then it is a 'special' question about something else and presumably resolvable elsewhere.<sup>46</sup> Marx does not bother to discuss how this would work, but then 'liberal' puzzlement at religious, ethno-nationalist and authoritarian populisms in recent years is in a quite similar position.

Turning to free trade in relation to the 'social question', in his public speech and published *Discourse*, Marx outlines the social reformer's dilemma, that is, he offers a general schema that applies to those engaging with the 'social question' up to and including fundamental changes in the economy and therefore society. He has a 'practical' communist in mind. Note also that the concept of revolution applies within the context not simply to his own radical position, but back along the scale to the situation in non-constitutional authoritarian states where the concept of any 'social question' at all was revolutionary. This speech of 9 January 1848 in French to the Brussels Democratic Association (i.e. prior to the democratizing revolutions that began in Paris in February) developed as a political intervention out of his notes for the planned speech of the preceding September. The *Deutsche-Brüsseler Zeitung* published a report on

this later speech for German readers; the pamphlet-version was published in French at the end of January, and, as often with Marx, other translations – this time into Flemish – failed to appear. A full German translation appeared later that year.<sup>47</sup>

The peroration in this work – specifically recalled by Marx in 1859 – is effectively a political theory lesson for middle-class businessmen interested in liberalizing policy and politics in Belgium:

- Free trade is said to imply ‘the freedom of one individual in relation to another’, but in fact it implies ‘freedom of Capital to crush the worker’.<sup>48</sup>
- The ‘laws formulated by the political economists ... have been based upon the hypothesis that the trammels which still interfere with commercial freedom have disappeared’, which is of course what ‘free traders’ want.<sup>49</sup>
- The most important law that they have identified is ‘that competition reduces the price of every commodity to the minimum cost of production’. It follows that the ‘natural price’ of labour is the minimum of wages, i.e. ‘the articles absolutely necessary for the maintenance of the worker ... and ... of his class’.<sup>50</sup>
- As manufacturing ‘progresses’, the minimum of wages is constantly sinking in terms of the quality of the ‘means of subsistence’, so that ‘the man’ is forced ‘to live the life of a machine’.<sup>51</sup>
- Free traders can either reject the laws of political economy, or face up to the brute facts of class exploitation.<sup>52</sup>
- ‘Cosmopolitan exploitation’ is not ‘universal brotherhood’ – as some free traders claim.<sup>53</sup>
- The international division of labour does not promote ‘harmony’ between countries based on ‘natural advantages’ in trade goods.<sup>54</sup>
- Production moves internationally to where raw materials and local labour are cheapest.<sup>55</sup>

- There are ‘some branches of industry which ... secure to the nations which especially foster them the command of the market of the world’.<sup>56</sup>
- Free traders admit that ‘one nation can grow rich at the expense of another’ and should therefore admit that ‘in the same country one class can enrich itself at the expense of another’.<sup>57</sup>

Marx's comments on the ‘Protective system’ are particularly incisive and prescient: it establishes ‘manufacture upon a large scale in any given country’, which by definition makes it ‘dependent upon the market of the world’ and thus subject to the pressures of free trade in due course, anyway. And the ‘Protective system’ also works against the various protectionisms of feudalism and medievalism by helping ‘to develop free competition within a nation’. But in general this system is conservative, because it is predicated on autarchic nationalism, which cannot be sustained in the face of the global economy, driven as it is by principles of free trade that follow from economic laws. But free trade itself is self-destructive, since it necessarily engenders extreme inequality and therefore class antagonism.<sup>58</sup>

Marx expected revolutions and social change to grow out of these antagonisms, which – in terms of a social democracy that addresses, or at least recognizes the ‘social question’ – have indeed occurred. These were revolutions with or without violence that have been sustained as compromises, sometimes specifically as class compromises, and often on other more general ‘human’ grounds: abolition of old-age or child poverty, for instance, or universal state pensions and/or health insurance and the like. Marx's schema is clear and provocative, and deliberately so, since his activism relied – as most activism does – on stating a position and then defending it. Later on in life – when he had more (enforced) leisure, and more resources for research – much of the empirical detail concerning the ‘social question’ was filled in, forming substantial sections of his *magnum opus*, the first volume of *Capital*, and giving vivid pictures of historical and contemporary inequality, exploitation, suffering and slavery.



# Democratizing the Present, Envisioning the Future

Writing on behalf of others, specifically committees or groups of which he was a member, Marx was rather more prepared to be programmatically explicit, of which there are two notable instances. One is in the *Manifesto* of 1848, and the other in 'The Civil War in France', an address drafted in English in 1871 for the IWMA after the fall of the Paris Commune, an urban uprising in 1870 in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. The list of demands in the *Manifesto* is actually a 'first step' in the workers' revolution, and – over the following century – working-class people, eventually including women, secured some access at some times to political participation in constitutional, representative institutions in some countries. Today this looks like a list of social-democratic, even merely liberal institutional demands, which are mostly coincident now with commonplace understandings of what democratic governments do, and how they do it. At the time when Marx wrote, these demands were 'communist' in the sense that they were boldly and radically liberal, but not in the sense that they in themselves demanded or required the total abolition of economically constructed classes and of monetary exchange generally.

These 'first steps' demands include 'expropriation of land', 'progressive taxation', 'abolition of inheritance', a 'national bank', 'centralization' of 'transport', 'nationalized factories', 'equal obligation to labour', 'managerial unification for agriculture and industry' and 'free public education for all children'.<sup>59</sup> Reading these through the lens of social-democracy and the welfare state – rather than through the lens of later Soviet or Maoist central planning and dictatorship – it is fair to see eminent domain and planning controls on land-use as 'expropriation', and indeed it is sometimes described as such by libertarians. It is also fair to see central banks, set up to issue and manage currencies, as a 'national bank'; transport policy and infrastructure planning as 'centralization'; national industrial strategies, public investment and any number of tax-breaks and incentive schemes as 'nationalized factories'; and 'agribusiness' as an 'industry' that is publicly subsidized and highly regulated. Even



where these aren't actually done as a matter of good governance, they are in present-day terms do-able in principle.

In 1848, though, communist or otherwise, all of these ideas were certainly points of struggle, and not just debate, given that the struggles were precisely to establish rights to spaces where the public could engage in debates. The struggles continued for many decades, and there were many reversals: indeed – as detailed in Marx's 'The Civil War in France'<sup>60</sup> – mass repression and even massacre. Marx's communism was 'practical' (in his own word) precisely because he distinguished it in theory and in practice from utopian fantasies and experiments, and because he made it coincide with what appear today to be views and demands that have – owing to the influence of later events on our thinking – nothing much to do with communism as a distinctive movement or even to be at all remarkable in definitional and programmatic terms.

The IWMA, with which Marx had been associated since its foundation in 1864, was an international 'umbrella' organization of socialist groups and national delegations. At the time there were very few legal and significant mass political parties at all in any meaningful sense. While the uprising was treated in most press accounts as an outburst of barbarism, inexplicably and violently opposed to a French republican peace brokered with the victorious Prussian occupiers, the IWMA naturally saw these events as a tragedy of the people (broadly interpreted as workers) and of democracy in the sense of popular decision-making (provincial republican counter-claims notwithstanding).<sup>61</sup>

This Address was thus controversial at the time and garnered Marx his first notice and brief notoriety in the English press as a 'Red Terror Doctor' living in London.<sup>62</sup> His comments are thus – and as usual – a political intervention, constructed to inspire (or rather console) an audience, and to memorialize the uprising in a highly specific way. This has been much criticized since Marx's time for historical inaccuracy, but then he had not been in Paris as an eye-witness, and the genre he was writing in was not historical anyway, but rather currently political. Myth-making as an activist practice often makes politics, so it is rather pointless to ask if the institutions of the Commune were really as Marx described them. However,

looked at the other way round, this was an occasion when – in a collective context – Marx wrote more like a theorist, though not exactly as a guru, since he wrote on behalf of an organization and executive committee.

Marx's idealization of the Commune as a decision-making model for the nation – and a model ‘down to even the smallest country hamlet’ – was one of representative but mandated democracy, the ‘self-government of the producers’, backed up by a ‘national militia’ with ‘an extremely short term of service’, a decidedly practical-political – rather than utopian – proviso. In this model decision-making begins at the lowest level in representative assemblies, from which delegates – under strict mandates set by their constituents – go forward to district assemblies, and in the same way at regional level and on up to a national assembly. It follows that national-level decisions are mainly coordinating in character. In sum this was the ‘political form ... under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour’.<sup>63</sup> Many of these ideas are current today as political demands, albeit within centralized structures of government, which are themselves thoroughly imbued with the importance of economic management.

The identification of Marx, though, with the actual term ‘dictatorship’ is something of a political and scholarly artefact, as he did not identify himself with the phrase ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in print, but rather in correspondence, ‘notes to self’,<sup>64</sup> and attributions by him – in generally favourable terms – of the phrase to individuals and classes who were making politics that was in some sense communist or socialist in tenor. The clue to the apparent contradiction – between promoting revolutionary democratization and yet advocating dictatorship as somehow consistent – lies in Marx's assessment of the post-feudal, modern political dynamic as that of class struggle. Marx's exploratory principle was that classes made politics, and political change arose from these struggles, not just in the past but in the present. On this view democratizing struggles that would succeed would be class struggles – commercial property-holding classes defeating feudal ones, and in due course, working classes (the ‘proletariat’) defeating commercial (‘bourgeois’) ones. This was equally and necessarily just as much an economic struggle as a political one, since – in Marx's

view – these were always in essence the same (notwithstanding appearances and denials). It followed that democratizing institutions were highly progressive in this process, but were vehicles of the rising class in so far as non-aristocratic modes of participation were allowed. But crucially further democratization promised entry points for the next class in so far as further extensions of the franchise and of civil rights enabled mass electorates to form politically and – gain control! The *Manifesto* is quite explicit in recommending that the proletariat unite ‘as a class’ and make itself ‘into a ruling class’.<sup>65</sup> The flip-side of this, as Marx asserted throughout his career (albeit in vocabularies and genres varying with his target audiences), was that democracy (as far as it had got) was a ‘bourgeois’ project for class rule by commercial property owners who would – predictably – stop at nothing to defend their property from redistribution and – most significantly – from redefinition as ‘public’ rather than ‘private’. The intense and highly political rage that consumes Marx in his pamphlet *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* boils over when he sees the elected representatives of the commercial classes hand the country over to a dictator, the ‘Prince-President’, whose thuggish gangsterism was only thinly disguised by trappings of imperial kitsch.

As a viable political form, though, Marx's ‘bottom-up’ model for proletarian class-rule in ‘The Civil War in France’ looks an unlikely way to duplicate the economic advantages in production and consumption – enjoyed by some, though not all – that current representative systems generally promote. But then in that way Marx's model points to the costs, in certain respects, of the economico-political structures that constitute democracy as a seamless system at present. The ‘emancipation of labour’, which Marx mentions, is rather difficult to parse today and thus to understand as a slogan or a goal, and indeed Marx said that it was something to be ‘worked out’. It could be something as relatively simple as worker-cooperatives or cooperative businesses within which workers are in a partnership-share, or it could be something as revolutionary today as a morally responsible and classlessly egalitarian ‘eco-community’ of the planet.<sup>66</sup>

As a theorist of democracy Marx's real strength is the other way around: it lies in detailing in the clearest possible terms how fragile

democratic structures are, how easily they fall to authoritarian politicians by electoral demagoguery and *coups d'état*, and how large a part property-ownership and wealth-control play in representative institutions that style themselves 'democratic'. His commentary on the rise and fall of the Second Republic (1848–51) in France represents an extraordinary defence of constitutional principles of popular sovereignty and actually existing representative institutions, while detailing exactly why they are so fragile, and why a successful defence of them is so difficult. These institutions are not berated by Marx for their timidity in failing to live up to 'communist' ideals and thus to effect the revolutionary break with existing commercial society; rather he berated them for failing to live up to *their own* class-delimited conceptions of democracy and representation, even constitutional strictures and standards, and in fact to act in cowardly ways that undermined even their own personal and collective interests as 'bourgeois' economic agents.

The *Eighteenth Brumaire* explains how universal male suffrage in the elections for the office of president was easily manipulated by Bonaparte, as a presidential candidate, into victory for such a myth-making adventurer. This was much to the surprise of the political classes of the National Assembly, who had not reckoned on the peasant vote going to endorse an imperial memory of land-reform and nationalistic *gloire*. The enfranchisement of the urban working-class, however, was not at all popular among the propertied classes and their similarly situated parliamentary representatives, or with newspaper proprietors and editors. Playing on fears of disorder and class-driven threats to private property, successive parliamentary groups backtracked on popular sovereignty and joined forces to see that urban demonstrations on economic issues were suppressed. These legislators then acted to restrict the suffrage and to suppress unwanted opposition.<sup>67</sup>

Bonaparte saw his chance to be the saviour of 'order' by extending his presidential term through unconstitutional means, and – with the consent of parliamentarians backed by a national plebiscite – to rule by decree. This act then ended republican rule based on popular sovereignty and substituted instead – as Bonaparte made clear subsequent to the writing and publication of Marx's pamphlet – a

regime in which he ruled by himself as Emperor Napoleon III, ratified by another plebiscite in late 1852.

Marx's genre in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* was not history but rather history-in-the-making, since he had followed the revolutions of 1848–9 very closely via press reports and had written his own newspaper articles as events took their course, which were the basis for his narration. What Marx identifies is a dynamic within liberal democracy that many commentators and theorists miss, preferring to see it as an aberration or inexplicable puzzle: why do people vote for populist authoritarians, who are sometimes of an overtly ridiculous demeanour? And why are parliamentarians – who are the instantiation of, and the guardians of, popular sovereignty – so prone to devalue, curtail or abolish basic individual rights when issues of internal ‘order’ or national ‘security’ are put to them by ambitious executives and generals? Marx even details the thuggery evident in Bonaparte's version of a militarized police force, and his corrupt and unsustainable economic policies, his ‘casino capitalism’, and his conflation of tax funds with bribery and pay-offs.<sup>68</sup>

Marx's account of class politics in this turbulent period pays considerable tribute to working-class heroism in fighting for popular sovereignty, though his rather predictable ‘take’ on proletarian activism has just as predictably generated sceptical and usually hostile comment. But the more interesting, more detailed and more pertinent account is actually that of politics among the richest elites, lesser grandees and landowners, wealthy businessmen and financiers, and finally the broader middle-classes located in the professions, in property-owners and rentiers, and in those ‘of private means’. As Marx explains, these classes and ‘class fractions’ are easily panicked into fearing for what they have from those who have less or nearly nothing at all. At this point in politics, economic interest often crosses over into delusion, such that in this case Bonaparte's myth-making about himself overrode any faith in democratic systems that the commercial classes might ordinarily have. Thus authoritarianism takes hold by popular demand.

Put schematically, Marx identifies within liberal democratic formations, which are based on commodity production and wealth-accumulation, a dynamic relationship between property,

authoritarianism and representative institutions. The upshot of his analysis is that popular sovereignty needs active support, since ‘scares’ of disorder and anarchy play into class-based fears about property, and into personality-based delusions about authority. Most democracies since Marx's time have reverted in civil war to authoritarian rule and military dictatorship at some point, and many have succumbed more than once. As an activist Marx spent more time supporting popular sovereignty in coalitional politics, addressing questions that are pertinent to, and characteristic of, that political formation, than he did articulating distinctively communist principles and trying to create a specifically communist future.

In the next chapter, *Capitalism and Revolution*, we look at the way that Marx explicated just this conjunction between ‘private’ interests and public institutions.

## Notes

- [1.](#) *Politics* 1275a22.
- [2.](#) For a brief analytical and historical discussion of democracy, see John Hoffman and Paul Graham, *Introduction to Political Theory*, 3rd edn (Harlow: Pearson, 2015), ch. 5.
- [3.](#) Constitution of the United States of America, Preamble.
- [4.](#) See the various on-line published materials on democracy related to ‘audit’, ‘deficit’ and ‘index’, which track the features that comprise democracy, assemble evidence and produce evaluative and rank-ordered results.
- [5.](#) Marx to Weydemeyer, 5 March 1852, *CW*: 62, 65; see also [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx” ’.
- [6.](#) See [Chapter 2](#) ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’.
- [7.](#) Sperber, *Karl Marx*, ch. 1; see [Chapter 2](#) ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’.
- [8.](#) *LPW* 158; *CW* 29: 261.



- [9.](#) Sperber, *Karl Marx*, ch. 2.
- [10.](#) LPW 161; CW 29: 264; see [Chapter 3](#), ‘History and Progress’.
- [11.](#) For biographical details, see Carver, *Friedrich Engels: His Life and Thought*, chs 1–2.
- [12.](#) LPW 158–9; CW 29: 261–2; see [Chapter 2](#), ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’.
- [13.](#) Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, pp. 104–15.
- [14.](#) Carver, *Friedrich Engels*, ch. 4.
- [15.](#) Highlighted albeit briefly in Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, pp. 135–44.
- [16.](#) Carver, *Engels*, ch. 4.
- [17.](#) For the most thoroughly contextual analysis of these writings, see Leopold, *Young Karl Marx*.
- [18.](#) EPW (excerpts): 1–27; CW 3: 3–129.
- [19.](#) EPW 57–70; CW 3: 175–87.
- [20.](#) Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, pp. 135–50; see [Chapter 2](#) ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’.
- [21.](#) EPW 70; CW 3: 187; emphasis in original.
- [22.](#) CW 3: 133–45.
- [23.](#) CW 3: 133.
- [24.](#) CW 3: 137–41.
- [25.](#) CW 3: 142.
- [26.](#) See Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- [27.](#) I.e. in simplified terms, between monarchies based on medieval social orders or ‘estates of the realm’, rather than on

individualism, representative institutions, marketable rights to property and other French revolutionary institutions.

[28.](#) *CW* 3: 143–4; emphasis in original.

[29.](#) *CW* 3: 142–4.

[30.](#) *CW* 3: 143; emphasis in original.

[31.](#) Engels was involved in this politicized academic scene as a journalist while on his military service in Berlin; see Carver, *Friedrich Engels*, ch. 3.

[32.](#) *EPW* 58; *CW* 3: 176; emphasis in original.

[33.](#) *EPW* 60; *CW* 3: 178; emphasis in original.

[34.](#) *EPW* 61; *CW* 3: 179–81; emphasis in original.

[35.](#) *EPW* 66, 68; *CW* 3: 183, 185; emphasis in original.

[36.](#) *EPW* 69; *CW* 3: 186–7; emphasis in original.

[37.](#) *EPW* 69–70; *CW* 3: 187.

[38.](#) Gabriel, *Love and Capital*, pp. 93–113, where these political activities are covered in some detail.

[39.](#) [*Discours sur libre échange*].

[40.](#) *CW* 29: 264; *CW* 6: 450–65.

[41.](#) *CW* 6: 282–90; also published in the Manchester *Northern Star*.

[42.](#) *CW* 6: 282.

[43.](#) *CW* 6: 283–5.

[44.](#) *CW* 6: 279–81.

[45.](#) *CW* 6: 280.

[46.](#) *CW* 6: 281.

[47.](#) *CW* 6: 695 n. 246.

[48.](#) CW 6: 463.

[49.](#) CW 6: 462. Criticism of the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) in the USA tracks this argument, as do similar arguments against similar associations elsewhere, e.g. British Eurosceptics' view of the European Union.

[50.](#) CW 6: 452

[51.](#) CW 6: 453; numerous critical studies track this argument, for example, Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On Getting By in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), also fictionalized as critical commentary on 'high tech' working conditions in Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's, 2013); see also press commentary on the 'gig economy'.

[52.](#) CW 6: 463.

[53.](#) CW 6: 464.

[54.](#) CW 6: 464. Marx's sarcasm here is interestingly post-colonial: 'You believe perhaps, gentlemen, that the production of coffee and sugar is the natural destiny of the West Indies.' 'Two centuries ago, nature, which does not trouble itself about commerce, had planted neither sugar-cane nor coffee trees there.'

[55.](#) CW 6: 464. Globalization has almost become a synonym for the 'export of jobs' from the 'global' West to East, North to South; see Terry Boswell and Dimitris Stevis, *Globalization and Labor: Democratizing Global Governance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

[56.](#) CW 6: 464; press comment on 'high tech' financial and digital industries bears this out, and in particular the 'bubble' valuations of companies in these sectors.

[57.](#) CW 6: 464–5; see the discussions in Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London: Verso, 2012).

- [58.](#) *CW* 6: 465.
- [59.](#) *LPW* 19–20; *CW* 6: 504–6.
- [60.](#) *LPW* 163–207; *CW* 22: 307–59.
- [61.](#) Musto, *Workers Unite!*, pp. 30–6.
- [62.](#) Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, pp. 507–9.
- [63.](#) *LPW* 185–7; *CW* 22: 330–3.
- [64.](#) Such as ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’; the latter was a unifying document for the socialist movement formulated in 1875, about which Marx made ‘marginal notes’, later published by Engels in 1891 as part of a project to align the now unified German socialist party with a ‘Marxist’ programme; *LPW* 208–26; *CW* 24: 75–99; see the very detailed contextual discussion on ‘The Career of a Slogan’ in Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, vol. 1: *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy, 1818–1850* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 284–336.
- [65.](#) *LPW* 20; *CW* 6: 505–6.
- [66.](#) See [Chapter 5](#) ‘Capitalism and Revolution’, and [Chapter 6](#) ‘Exploitation and Alienation’.
- [67.](#) *LPW* 93–111; *CW* 11: 164–80.
- [68.](#) See the discussion in Terrell Carver, ‘Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: Democracy, Dictatorship, and the Politics of Class Struggle’, in *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism*, eds. Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 103–28.

## 5

# Capitalism and Revolution

Marx is generally acknowledged to be the greatest – in the sense of the most thorough – critic of capitalism to date. This is not to say that many people today accept his exact criticisms of the system, or even that his definition and characterization of the system have very much purchase in the first place. So far the approach to Marx in this book has been to look for ways that his concepts overlapped with those of his contemporaries and those that we use today: class, history, progress, democracy, socialism.<sup>1</sup> This approach runs counter to presuming that what makes Marx interesting is what he himself – and various others – have picked out as distinctively Marxian, in one way or another, and therefore ‘what makes Marx “Marx” ’.<sup>2</sup> The defect of this latter strategy is not that it historicizes Marx – he is, after all, historical – but that it estranges him from us and obscures his politics. And, as we have seen, his politics drove his writings, which were interventions into coalitional activities with like-minded revolutionaries intent on creating like-minded publics, who were or would be liberal-democratic, at least to some degree. And again – as noted in previous chapters – to be liberal-democratic in *any* degree in the German states up to the 1860s was to be a revolutionary, or at least highly suspect and liable to harassment and penalization. Indeed long after the 1840s socialist parties were again made illegal in the German Empire, from 1878 to 1891 – and it was illegal for women to attend political meetings at all.<sup>3</sup>

Thus what Marx shared with his contemporaries – and still shares with us – seems an appropriately realistic and productive place to start. Capitalism, as a named practice and economic system, is generally rather uncontroversial now purely as a descriptive term. It has certainly passed into the language, even if in most economic discourse today we hear less about capitalism and more about ‘free’ markets, traders, speculators, investors, savers, billionaires, ‘high net worth individuals’, entrepreneurs, venture capital and the like. There is some political mileage here in disaggregating a system into the

everyday discourse where the reader can see that the terms and the practices are made to interlock in commonplace activities. This is where 'the basics' in micro-economics begins, refining and re-defining these everyday terms by constructing precise and mathematically operational definitions, theories and policy recommendations. These everyday micro-economic 'basics' are price, utility, marginality, preference, saving, investing, liquidity, profit, expenditure and consumption, rising to monetary policy, fiscal policy, inter-bank lending rates, GDP, current account and capital account as 'balance of payments' and similar concepts that better quality news media presume will be understood.

Marx's terminology for the economic system changed somewhat over his career as an activist engaging with the 'social question'. His early usage was 'civil society', though his term (and Hegel's) was *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* or 'bourgeois society', as it is commonly rendered into English. But now it is hard to find this locution – 'bourgeois society' – in use outside Marxist circles. Civil society, the alternative in English, has come to mean the voluntary or 'third sector', that is, economic activities that are neither state and public sector (i.e. staffed by civil servants or public employees) nor private sector (i.e. staffed within commercial, for-profit enterprises). Alternatively, and in a more twentieth-century post-Marxist usage, civil society has included commercial, 'for-profit' enterprises but excluded only state-owned or controlled activities. Hence today's usage is somewhat ambiguous and confusing as to whether the term means only voluntary organizations or includes private-sector enterprises as well. Historically, of course, civil society signified what was 'of the citizenry', as opposed to religious or military authorities and their activities, however these 'state' activities were funded, whether by taxation, alms or tribute, hence civil = civilian. And in the German-speaking states, what was 'of the citizenry' was *bürgerliche*.<sup>4</sup>

'Bourgeois society' merely renders *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* into English via a loan word from French, with connotations of parvenu philistinism in matters of taste. This reflects aesthetic and moral evaluations current in France of the aristocratic over the merely commercial. The German of Hegel's time and Marx's reflected both anti-commercial snobbery and a distinction between commercial



activities, on the one hand, and state/military/religious/aristocratic establishments, on the other. Marx's engagement with *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* was not undertaken, however, to denigrate or validate a class in relation to good or bad taste or moral character, or merely to distinguish it as an 'order' of society distinct from (merely 'biological') family life or (more 'rationally') the state and church bureaucracies. It was rather, in the context of the German states, to link the apparently 'grubby' commercial activities associated with money-making through trade and manufacture with the introduction of power-driven industrial processes and vastly increased productive potentials in goods and services.

## Practical Encounters with Political Economy

In his early journalism Marx argued strongly that the governments of his time should take at least some responsibility for the 'artificial' poor, given that human economic activities, rather than some 'natural' process, 'just deserts' or blind fate had caused their situation.<sup>5</sup> The other side of the coin was an argument that economic activities were themselves 'artificial', because human activities were causing what goes on in the economy to change and develop. It followed that scrutiny and judgement were required in making sense of this, rather than just excusable ignorance or resignation. Marx seems to have got himself to this point in 1843 after – as he says – becoming intrigued with the 'material interests' that he encountered in his associations with the business-minded editors and commercial backers of the *Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne, the economic capital of the Rhineland.<sup>6</sup>

Intuitively Marx seems to have positioned himself on the more activist side of the editorial collective and to have got the newspaper management – and eventually himself – into trouble by pushing hard on the 'social question'. The less activist side of the group pushed hard only on the 'trade question',<sup>7</sup> declaring the need for the state to get interested in this at all, other than for purposes of tax collection and moralizing regulation. What changed for Marx after the closure of the newspaper in March 1843 was not an engagement with Hegel as such, but rather a focused study of French and British

political economy via Hegel's appropriation of these materials into his philosophized version of an 'orderly' class structure. In his *Philosophy of Right* (1820) Hegel had articulated this idealized vision in terms that lay between medieval 'orders' or 'estates' and the more modern conceptions of 'civil' individuals engaging in commercial activities – though in state-defined 'corporations' rather than in 'free market' entrepreneurial structures.<sup>8</sup>

While Marx had some access to Hegel's source material for these passages in French-language books (neither Hegel nor Marx at the time read English), he encountered the political economists at this stage chiefly through Hegel's text and notes. The chief sources were Pierre le Pesant, sieur de Boisguillebert (1646–1714), Sir James Steuart (1712–80), Jean-Baptiste Say (1767–1832), Adam Smith (1723–90) and the like, but Marx was soon gifted with a much snappier summary of 'political economy'. This short essay was drafted by Engels, and submitted in November 1843 to Marx as co-editor of the putative 'first number' of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*.<sup>9</sup>

Political economy was the descriptive and evaluative literature on economic matters, dating back to the seventeenth century and written in a statecraft genre, and thus in an advisory mode. This mode, of course, presumes that there are rulers who might be interested in advice, and that their states are large enough to engage in expansion, which requires wealth. In that context the idea that trade creates wealth, rather than simply transferring it through exchanges of equal value, was itself controversial. It was also widely disbelieved, and so rejected on empirical, philosophical and moral grounds. Moreover, the relationship between money and wealth was something of a mystery anyway, and if considered in relation to loans and interest, also something of an abomination, given traditional church teachings on usury, and their overlap with classical Aristotelian suspicions of 'using money to make money'.<sup>10</sup>

There was then – as there is now – a politics of science as such, whether the social science be 'political economy' or – as now – simply 'economics'. And, returning to our earlier discussion of history,<sup>11</sup> there was a considerable question then – as there is now – about the malleability of current practices in political society and

social life more generally. And that issue, in turn, was reflected in different views as how best to present in simple terms what today's practices actually are. Those who took a historical line generally argued that modern commercial practices of wealth production and financial accumulation were a marker of modernity, civilization and progress, over against barbarism, backwardness and regression. Those unconcerned with such historical issues were apparently happy enough with fables that appeared to demonstrate the timelessness and therefore naturalness of current commercial practices: in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith's fictional 'hunters' swapped beavers for deer by barter, and then made this cumbersome practice more efficient by inventing money. There were similar stories elsewhere in this Robinson Crusoe or 'just-so' genre of explanation and justification.<sup>12</sup>

However, Marx did not simply leap into the fray with his own answers, writing as another political economist might have done, since he had not yet read the originals sufficiently well in order to establish the exact outlines of the issues and debates. It is clear, though, that he suspected their political bias as advocates for a new commercial and entrepreneurial class. Engels's summary account provided a very handy treatment of 'the basics' of political economy, importantly rendered in German in his short article. And even better, Engels drew conclusions about the 'social question', and about the politics of the science of political economy, not just the politics of the political economists as individuals. These conclusions mirrored Marx's own experiences with bourgeois 'material interests' and the suffering that concerned him in class-divided, but industrializing social settings, such as he had described from local accounts. Later Marx characterized Engels's article as 'inspired', and given that he immediately drafted a plan for a 'critique of political economy', it is hard not to see Engels's work as directly inspirational.<sup>13</sup>

Marx's summary or 'conspectus' of Engels's article was contained within his so-called 'Economic and Philosophical Notebooks' of 1844, which consisted mostly of fairly straightforward excerpts from the books he was reading at the time, generally political economy in French and German.<sup>14</sup> In effect Engels provided Marx not just with usable 'basics' but with what in Engels's own terms was a communist

political ‘take’ on the situation. Communist in this context means simply a critique of private property and a commitment to its abolition at some point in the future, and in some more or less specified sense. The communist alternative was generally common property – again, in some sense or other, depending on which communist writer was under consideration. Marx indeed found *all* the communist writers he had encountered unsatisfactory, as either too vague or too specific, hence the detailed studies on the constituent concepts and definitional ‘tool kit’ that he began to record.

Marx's opening shot in his manuscript ‘Summary of Frederick Engels’ Article ...’<sup>15</sup> is thus to pick out the concept of ‘*Private property*’, which he immediately links to ‘trade’ as ‘a direct source of gain for the trader’. In the next sentence he tracks political economy from trade to value, parsed into real value or utility (i.e. how much use one actually gets out of something) and exchange value, which he relates – via an alternative rendering within political economy – to prices. These, he notes, are not equivalent to costs of production, as otherwise there would be no ‘gain’ or profit. And, perhaps puzzlingly he comments, ‘Only that which can be monopolised has *price*.’ But then for Marx private property – the starting point – is a form of monopoly control over some things in the first place, privileging some people while excluding others.

After that Marx's notes become rather more problem-setting than definitional. In effect he sets puzzles in understanding what the relationship is between capital and labour, and profit and capital, and similarly between interest and profit. Profit, he quickly concludes, ‘is the weight that capital puts in the scales when the costs of production are determined’ and ‘remains inherent in capital’. Wondering aloud, as it were, about the relationship between wages and production costs, he concludes that ‘human labour’ has become ‘divided into labour capital’, as he follows Engels's summary rendition of the science.<sup>16</sup>

Engels's actual text as accepted and published by Ruge and Marx was very much in the politicizing and moralizing rhetorical mode of Chartist journalism, a genre at which Engels was super-adept. His opening sentence links the new(ish) science of political economy

with the expansion of trade and mechanized production, noting that both the practice and the science are born of ‘mutual envy and greed’ and bear ‘the mark of the most detestable selfishness’. In conclusion he aspires ‘to expound in detail the despicable immorality of this [factory] system’ and ‘to expose mercilessly the economist's hypocrisy which here appears in all its brazenness’.<sup>17</sup> Overall Engels traces the history of internationalized production and trade in conjunction with the political economy that accompanied these developments.

It is worth noting again that political economy was conceived by its practitioners within a political framework as statecraft, such that statecraft should therefore become economic in its practice, which would of course include *dismantling* the medievalisms that regulated and restrained ‘free trade’, whether domestic or across borders. The late nineteenth-century separation of the economic and political sciences had not yet happened, and indeed the politics of that now commonplace separation should be noted, since such academic matters have very practical political consequences. Distinctions of fact from value, positive from normative, scientific objectivity from political bias, are themselves political moves, insulating some assumptions, deductions and truths from criticism and disavowing questions about the political or indeed moral consequences of the social practices under analysis. Whether the political economists were mercantilists, advocating national accumulation of wealth at the expense of other nations, or ‘free traders’, advocating competitive market trading to the mutual advantage of individuals, Engels's sentiments were sweepingly critical on the same grounds: accumulations of monetary wealth as capital allow property-owners to benefit at the expense of wage-labourers, who suffer individual and trans-generational inequalities, including abject poverty. For Engels political economy is thus a hypocritical ‘science’ through which these unacceptable consequences are made invisible or speciously justified.

## Post-Marx

It would not be difficult to find similar sentiments at any Occupy or climate-change protest, though moralized accounts such as Engels's

above – and eventually Marx's – are easily dismissed as Marxist, since they resonate today with the struggles, failures, naïveté and horror of twentieth-century global 'great power' and ideological politics. Or alternatively modern economics, as opposed to the political economy outlined above, is pressed into service to delineate the economic facts in empirical/statistical terms, from which moralized judgements could move to policy, whether reformist or revolutionary in some sense. But with respect to a straightforward application – that is, moving from Marx's texts and ideas – to current understandings of capitalism, there is a kind of reverse anachronism: the terms of the past, i.e. political economy, are not those of the present, i.e. modern economics.

Put another way, the difficulty here is that we can read Marx's critical analysis of the capitalist mode of production, in *Capital*, vol. 1, and other works, but to do that we will find his terminological mode quite frustrating. This is because from the 1870s the marginalist revolution through which political economy was transformed into modern economics postdates his work, but largely controls our thinking about the issues that he – and we – have in common. Moreover, any attempt to align Marx directly with ourselves is then haunted by yet another spectre, that is, Marxist economics. This hybrid form of economics attempts to make an exact and scientifically robust translation between the two: modern economics and Marx's critique of political economy. One possible strategy for gaining some clarity here is to pull our attention back to capitalism as a system, i.e. what we are wanting to talk about in the first place.

Marx's own terminology for this level of generality developed in his lifetime, first as *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*/civil society/bourgeois society, as we have seen above, and then to the modern bourgeois mode of production [*bürgerliche Produktionsweise*] or bourgeois relations of production [*die bürgerlichen Produktionsverhältnisse*]. We should note again, though, that 'bourgeois' as a loan-word in English draws connotations that *bürgerliche* does not: 'commercial' would do as well or better. Marx altered his ideas on exactly which basic concepts of political economy he would use to organize his projected critique, and in what order he would use them, and how much of his projected critique he could get into a volume: this was at first a half-volume in 1859, and later the first volume of a truncated



series.<sup>18</sup> But he certainly regarded the contemporary theorists in his sights as working within a system. By the time of the first edition of *Das Kapital* (1867), the use of that term ‘capital’ as the central organizing concept – and primary target of attack – was clear enough. The current, historical differentiation of societies in relation to this concept was also clear in Marx's opening phrase: ‘The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails ...’<sup>19</sup> And of course the two locutions go together: capital and capitalist. But the now familiar term ‘capitalism’ does not seem to have come along till later in the 1870s, and was therefore not current in most of Marx's published work as *Kapitalismus*. And anyway it was coined to promote the very practices that Marx proposed to excoriate and expunge through critique-as-activism.

Since Marx's time capitalism as a term has settled into something more descriptive, even though apparently descriptive usage tends to hide the historical questions that so occupied Marx. This was, namely, do the practical features that constitute this system derive from timeless aspects of human nature working themselves out historically, unless subjected to repression? Or does the system demarcate civilized/progressive/modern/democratic societies from backward/primitive/authoritarian/regressive ones, whether historical or currently existing? Is the system evolving of itself (unless repressed) to a better future for all? For some? For only the ‘industrious and rational’?<sup>20</sup> For anyone? For ‘the planet’? Does the system require political protections? Or balancing adjustments? Or amelioration? Or sharp interventions after crises? Or crisis-prevention measures? At what point does ‘fixing the system’ break it? Or turn the system into something else? Are any or all of these solely political decisions? Or solely technical decisions that can be done ‘from the science’?

Marx's world was not merely much simpler; rather his task was not any of the above. His activism was necessarily political, as was the work of the political economists, in that states and governments – such as they were – had to be persuaded that these truths about production, consumption, distribution and exchange of goods and services were relevant to statecraft, and that somehow they had to decide which school of thought, which treatises and which

individuals to believe. The issues and questions detailed above only exist because that battle was won over a hundred-year period and sticks with us today as, 'It's the economy, stupid!'<sup>21</sup>

Thus in the 1870s the battlefield shifted decisively away from Marx's critique, but not because of the way it tackled the 'social question' through concepts of class struggle and working-class activism.<sup>22</sup> Rather the shift came as economics moved away from political economy methodologically and conceptually, and thus – perforce – away from the most specifically technical terms of Marx's critique, and the detailed arguments and claims most closely associated with him and his 'thought'. Marx's critique of political economy was an immanent one: it worked within the terms set by the political economists as the subject-matter and basic presumptions of their debates and disagreements. These terms were handled methodologically by the political economists and by Marx, both working within the framework of 'natural philosophy'. Working with these presumptions and concepts, handed down from medieval and classical sources, was a primarily narrative exercise. This exercise was an enquiry into general concepts of wealth and value in order to provide explanations – and to set rules – for activities involving trade and money, whether the moral context was patriotic nation-building or individualistic market-trading.

Wealth was the major issue: did it come from land or labour? If the former, was wealth ultimately derived from rent on a scarce but essential and essentially limited resource? If the latter, how did the labourer's honest toil relate to the factory-owner's profit? And most pertinently, when monetary wealth accumulates from any source, does it derive from coin or notes as a neutral medium for equal exchange of value, registered as a 'natural' price that 'naturally' regulates market transactions? And if not, does it derive from a necessarily unequal exchange of value, and if so, what justifies this? As we have seen, Aristotle, and religious and secular thinkers under his influence, were clearly suspicious of the idea that wealth arises justifiably from 'using money to make money', i.e. interest on loans. But political economists supporting monetary circulation, risk-taking investments, diversified goods and services and constant improvement of manufactures often took the opposite line, arguing the fact – and the necessity – of entrepreneurial incentivization, re-

investment of profits in yet more productive enterprises, and ready accessibility of credit as a productive service.

The marginalist revolution in economics derailed these issues by foreclosing on the terms of the debate. Prices simply were values, or rather any problem with value was merely philosophical, so scientifically, by contrast, the relevant concept was price, which was after all empirical (there are prices in existent markets) and numerical (which allowed a quite different methodology to flourish, namely quantitative analysis). Trade through market exchanges was then easily explained, and wealth accumulation in monetary terms inferred as a logical and beneficial result. Philosophical issues then arise only in philosophy discussions, not economic ones. Economic discussions proceed from abstract but ‘everyday’ assumptions about individuals and utility-preferences, not from debates that create moral issues that are not to the purpose – which is to accept, rather than explore, the factuality of market relationships. From the point of view of modern economics, society is not divided naturally or necessarily into large-landed, small-propertyed and labouring ‘orders’ or classes; society is rather composed of individuals using and trading resources so as to get more, at least in principle, or as a heuristic device and social ideal. However, the point of my discussion here is not to adjudicate on the strengths or weaknesses of either framework – political economy or modern economics – but rather to highlight the incommensurability of the two, and hence the difficulties of intercommunication and translation involved in making sense of Marx, given the quite different presumptions.

Moreover, the marginalist revolution derailed the concepts within Marx's critique that he himself – and of course numerous commentators and critics – have taken to be most distinctively Marxian and constitutive of Marxism and Marxist economics. In his critique Marx gave the political economists credit for setting up an important problem – where does profit come from, when monetary exchange is in theory an exchange of equal values. And for offering the germ of a good answer: labour must somehow be an important part of value, and – so Marx uniquely argued – in fact the productive source of the ‘surplus’ in value from which profit arises in systems of monetary exchange. Marginalists, and with them most modern economists, simply reject the idea that profit is somehow itself a

problem, rather than an assumption within their system or, as we might say, a new paradigm<sup>23</sup> for thinking about production, consumption, distribution and exchange conducted on a now uncontroversial monetary basis. In that way they generated a social science by raising practical rather than philosophical issues. Marx was made to look old fashioned by contrast, overtly political (rather than 'scientific') and non-mathematical (which was not quite the case). The compromise, in Marxist economics, has been to argue Marx's case about labour, surplus value, prices and profits through quantifiable proxies so as to get to a political conclusion: namely that wage-workers are exploited – rather than fairly treated – and that capitalism cannot itself undo this exploitation, since the system is structured so as to reduce production costs, such as labour, in order to facilitate capital accumulation and productive investment.<sup>24</sup>

## Marx's Critique

However, why then is Marx frequently acknowledged to be the most thorough critic of capitalist society, in particular of the capitalist system, understood as a global empirical phenomenon and object of global political activism? Rather surprisingly this takes us back to the bourgeoisie or commercial classes, and the unforgettable picture Marx and Engels painted of them in the *Manifesto* as world-shaking historical actors.<sup>25</sup> As the authors state, whole cities were, and still are, conjured out of the ground, as technologies arise that produce vast amounts of new goods with less labour input, so virtually everything is transformed, not least legal and political systems, religion and morality, arts and sciences. In recent years this text has been recognized as a foundational account of globalization, in particular the way it portrays commercial development and financialization as rampaging across the world, an unstoppable force of auto-defining progressive development.<sup>26</sup> The benefits of market-driven economies producing cheap necessities and undreamt of luxuries are certainly extolled; if these passages are simply extracted from context, they are a virtual hymn to the bourgeoisie.<sup>27</sup>

Many of today's critics of globalization share – without necessarily knowing it – the critique of capitalism as a historical process,

understood in terms very similar to those of Marx and Engels. In the *Manifesto* the two note that cultures and traditions, as well as political and economic systems, are almost powerless to resist the forces of commercialism. Cheap goods drive out local producers, and in turn cheap goods produce local consumers wanting more of the same, and unable to revert to prior sources of supply and previous habits of consumption. Market forces and financial crises create instabilities in production and consumption, causing unemployment and penury. The system tends towards gargantuan accumulations of wealth in the hands of a very few, and increasing inequalities for the many, right down to the very poorest. Politicians and political systems promote hypocritical nostrums, arguing that ‘we’re all in it together’, that ‘there is no alternative’, that those receiving high pay and rewards are (circularly) ‘the deserving’ and morally admirable and that others down the income scale are ‘undeserving’ (circularly) and morally inferior. Rooted in selfish individualism, capitalism generates ‘free riding’ by selfish ‘private’ individuals on collectively provided benefits and a ‘collective action problem’, which is the reverse: selfish individuals will not sacrifice ‘private’ benefits for a collective good. These are familiar diagnoses when climate-change and ecological concerns arise internationally. Perhaps the worst indictment of all – and also the most Marxian accusation – is the argument that representative liberal democracy is so coincident with capitalism that money rules all, and – as the American satirist Will Rogers (1879–1935) said of the USA – ‘We have the best Congress money can buy.’<sup>28</sup> This of course turns on its head the liberal political defence of capitalism, namely that monetary exchange and consumer choice are the paradigm cases of the individual freedoms without which democracy is totally subverted.<sup>29</sup>

In sum as a historical process, and as political critique, Marx and Engels on capitalism have considerable purchase, precisely because they took a global view, and because they had a historicizing approach. This latter undercut the arguments that ‘human nature’ was the unchangeable cause of whatever ill effects history was producing, even if in different ways in different places, or that historical changes of epic proportions were necessarily impossible, since capitalism obviously was a defining historical change largely expunging pre-modern systems. However, characterizing a historical

process as the rise of the commercial classes, and the concomitant rise of the capitalist institutions that suited their interests, is rather different from arguing that capitalism is somehow a system with an inner logic that philosophical analysis could reveal. Modern economics, with its foundations in individual calculations of marginal utility, and its aggregative conceptions of state taxation, monetary and fiscal policies, market regulation and crisis management, has already foreclosed on the notion of an inner logic by treating the system more or less empirically and often ahistorically as merely the sum of its currently observable inter-related and interlocking parts. Marx's assumption was that these economic activities were all 'surface' phenomena, albeit intricately related, and requiring 'in-depth' exploration and political critique.

But for Marx these intricacies did not simply comprise the system in and of itself, but instead were merely the way that the logic of the system worked its way from deeper phenomena up to what could be observed. He expended some efforts deducing and illustrating this logic from 'surface' observations, but the logic was already there in his lengthy conceptual analysis of commodity, money and capital, the relationships between which were deduced from necessary truths – so he argued. This included truths about labour, and especially about labour-power, which was his distinctive conceptual amendment to political economy, and about value-in-exchange, which he took as a regulator of the prices that we observe. Effectively this was an argument that stabilities in apparently inexplicable or randomly appearing phenomena are the result of 'deeper' processes that conceptual reasoning can expose. To Marx modern economics would look like a nugatory exercise in induction, merely charting inter-relations in ever more complex representations, but not explaining them in essence. And it would, for that reason, look to him – as it does to many critics today – like a social science that is wholly or substantially complicit with the rich and powerful, or alternatively one so abstract in self-referential ways that it has no credible contact with lived human realities.<sup>30</sup> These are, of course, current criticisms, but ones that – from his perspective – Marx could well have made, and indeed his comments on the political economists of his day, particularly John Stuart Mill, are very much in this vein.<sup>31</sup>



However, Marx's actual published critique – as much as we have of it – is notoriously difficult to read, and for present purposes quite difficult to understand as a political intervention, at least at first glance (which, famously, is about as far as many readers get with *Capital*, vol. 1).<sup>32</sup> The situation in the 1840s was somewhat clearer with respect to Marx's published articles and sole single-author published book, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, written in French for Europe-wide impact. His German-language articles were political interventions into a highly censored and quite dangerous world in which debate proceeded in code, and was perforce limited to a considerable degree in its audience. While some of these pre-*Capital* works were fairly straightforward in terms of arguing through issues, e.g. press freedom, and constructing polemics against individuals, e.g. Proudhon, other works took on the 'Hegel issue' in the politics of the time, with much more recondite results, except, of course, to fellow Young Hegelians. Since the 1930s, though, and certainly since the 1960s, Marx's works and manuscripts in this 'Hegelian' vein have become quite famous, at least in political theory and philosophy circles within academia. Political followers of Marxism, whether Soviet, Chinese or otherwise, were rather slower to take an interest in these early writings by Marx, which were at the time non-canonical for Marxists. Part of the fascination has been the difficulty of these early works, caused both by the unfamiliarity in Anglophone circles of Hegelian philosophical schools and by the philosophical sophistication of Marx's ideas. And part of this rather surprising take-up of apparently arcane positions within, and against, German idealism, was – for the academic audience – by way of an attractive contrast with *Capital*, vol. 1, and its formidable difficulties, at least for philosophers. Economists of the twentieth century (unless overtly Marxist) were generally dismissive of the volume and of the critique as a whole, anyway, as discussed above.

In short, *Capital*, vol. 1, has not survived very well in the reception and use of Marx's *oeuvre*, apart from lip-service to this first instalment on a *magnum opus*. However, to get a grip on Marx's still controversial view that capitalism is a system with an inner logic we will need to develop a reading strategy to help us make sense of his most thoroughly elaborated work, which he took through three German editions (1867 and 1872) and a French translation (1872–5),

in which he made substantial revisions, reflected in the third German edition (1883).<sup>33</sup>

## Scholars and Hierarchies

As an activist Marx had a very wide spread of interventionist strategies. This activism has filtered down to us through the collected and complete works, but much of the *parti pris* and ‘of the moment’ quality of these writings has been lost. Very little, if any, of Marx’s journalism has been treated very seriously, even though much of it was in English for the American press. There have been occasional topical, rather than diary-like collections, e.g. ‘On India’ and ‘On Ireland’. My point here is that alongside *Capital*, vol. 1 (and the preceding manuscript materials for that volume, together with the posthumously edited manuscripts assembled as volumes 2 and 3) there is a parallel critique of capitalism as a system in Marx’s journalism itself. If we take the economic and financial crises of 1857–8 as an example, we get a clear sense of an inner logic working itself out through class-divided societies, and a clear sense of political potential in terms of class struggle as a result. But what we do not get in either *Capital*, vol. 1 or the newspaper articles, is the formulaic application of a theory to events as they unfold, such that what happens does or does not confirm a predictive theory. Rather what we get is a firm sense that capitalism is a system, that it has an inner logic, and that economic and financial crises are evidence that this is so, since they are – at least by imputation – unavoidable and endogenous, much as Engels had said in his early ‘Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy’.

In correspondence with Engels, Marx constructs quite lively summations of what he reads in the newspapers:

The MONETARY PANIC in London has SUBSIDED to some extent during the past few days but will soon begin afresh ... However, lendings by the Bank [of England] ... will keep a mass of transactions going which must ultimately lead to another CRASH.<sup>34</sup>

In the following passages Marx builds up a plausible historical sequence dependent on an inner logic to the capitalist system:

As distinct from earlier crises, what is still to some extent supporting the so-called MONEY-MARKET in London is the existence of JOINT-STOCK BANKS which didn't really expand until the last ten years ... if just one of these banks were now to collapse, there would be general uproar.<sup>35</sup>

The inner logic, though, does not work causally and chronologically: 'Hence it is greatly to be regretted that the ROYAL BRITISH BANK should have crashed prematurely.'<sup>36</sup>

At exactly this time Marx was writing an article for the *New-York Daily Tribune* with rather more theory in it (something unnecessary or simply presumed in correspondence with Engels):

Still the very recurrence of crises despite all the warnings of the past, in regular intervals, forbids the idea of seeking their final causes in the recklessness of single individuals. If speculation toward the close of a given commercial period appears as the immediate forerunner of the crash, it should not be forgotten that speculation itself was engendered in the previous phase of the period, and is therefore, itself a result and an accident,<sup>37</sup> instead of the final cause and the substance. The political economists who pretend to explain the regular spasms of industry and commerce by speculation, resemble the now extinct school of natural philosophers who considered fever as the true cause of all maladies.<sup>38</sup>

Turning to *Capital*, vol. 1, however, the genre and the diction – at least at the beginning and throughout the theoretical sections – are quite different. The object of Marx's critique is itself somewhat difficult to grasp, unlike the reported events that constitute an economic crisis. Is he objecting in political terms to societies where the capitalist mode of production holds sway, or in 'scientific' terms to what he recounts as the abstract theorization of such societies, namely political economy (in his own synthesis)? Unlike some modern economists, who have denied any necessary connection between the thinking and behaviour of actual human beings and the abstract concepts through which this behaviour is theorized and explained, Marx clearly regarded the theoretical concepts recounted from political economy as constitutive of the societies it purported to describe, influence and in many cases justify, as least to a degree.

This means that we can put the discourse of *Capital*, vol. 1 into the frame of performativity, so that the concepts of political economy – commodity, money, capital – describe no other reality than the social reality of repetitively using these and similar concepts in activities that are then understood in exactly those terms. That is, we know what money is because we see people using it in practical ways, so – while doing these practical acts of sale and purchase – they are making a powerful reality out of otherwise ‘dead’ metal or paper, which is then a social reality that we experience. Marx's communist/socialist politics perforce highlighted the negative experiences of workers, would-be workers and dependants. Already Marx has subverted the commonplace empiricism through which concepts simply reference objects as what they are, e.g. money is simply coined metal or authenticated printed paper or a similar token, and the commonplace rationalism that defines and explains relationships in abstract terms that are not those (or not quite those) employed in the activities themselves, e.g. marginal utility in a hierarchy of consumer preferences.

Looked at this way, the problem with *Capital*, vol. 1, is not just that the political economy in it became out of date within a few years of publication, but rather that Marx's critique of that political economy was itself very ambitiously conceived, and still puzzles most readers today. However, once past this opening difficulty, the architecture of the project – at least within volume 1 – becomes clear. As Marx said, he was working from the individual unit to the general phenomenon, a commonplace method in classical philosophy.<sup>39</sup> The individual unit here was the commodity, and the general phenomenon was capital. Though the logic of this conceptual development was classically Hegelian, precisely because it traced a conceptual development as an abstract ‘movement’, the text offers numerous empirical illustrations from real life, rather than Robinson Crusoe-style fictions. These empirical notes and references are included to help the reader understand what is going on and to jog the appropriate political sensibilities along the way. Working through this exposition, then, the reader encounters the constitutive concepts of *commodity* as an object of value – parsed as value-in-use and value-in-exchange, *money* as a representation of value and ultimately *capital*, the object of the exercise. Marx provides a descriptive and explanatory account

of the title-concept as ‘self-expanding value’, unlimited numerically but ultimately constrained through an inner logic that he had laboured to discover and that his exposition records.<sup>40</sup>

## Commodity, Money, Capital

Marx paid tribute to the political economists whose work he synthesized, though with some informative but often barbed footnote references. His praise was for their intuition that value and profit were in some way a function of labour. Not all political economists set themselves this problem or argued it through on that basis, but Marx dismissed their various approaches as merely superficial, offering only simple reflections of what could be seen merely by looking at surface phenomena, such as market prices. His careful, but highly Aristotelian parsing of labour as an activity, and labour-power as the potential for that activity, enabled him to argue that the latter had a peculiar property, namely that of producing more output of expended labour time than was required for the reproduction of its potential in terms of inputs – inputs being measured as ‘objectified’ labour time’.<sup>41</sup>

Labour-time, whether being expended or in ‘objectified’ form, is the common measure of both inputs and outputs here, and the surplus of labour-time from which, so Marx argued, profit had to derive, given an assumption of equal exchange. Labour was thus the only source of value from which surplus-value, and thus – on the economic surface – profit, could possibly arise. Of course as Marx, and his readers, moved forward in the exposition toward the surface phenomena, which were apparently derived from, and controlled by, this inner logic, the empirical reference for this quite abstract account becomes more problematic. And the concepts of labour-time, value and surplus-value evolve as virtual or implied regulators within the system. In Marx’s account ‘socially necessary labour-time’<sup>42</sup> emerges as a regulator of value, and hence of prices taken over time, rather than actual inputs of actual labour-time from actual workers in actual factories in actual competitive process of production and exchange.<sup>43</sup>

On the one hand Marx's exposition of capitalism as a system with an inner logic follows eminently logical paths through observation, abstraction, analysis, deduction and synthesis. On the other hand, capitalism as a system emerges as just that only because it is said to reflect the inner logic imputed to it. Anyone wanting to observe the workings of the inner logic by collecting and analysing surface phenomena, e.g. market stabilities in day-to-day pricing, or alternatively market instabilities as exceptional or periodic crashes, will have no apparent links back to the unobservable 'building blocks' of Marx's exposition. That is, metering a worker's socially necessary labour-time output and reproductive inputs of 'objectified' social necessary labour-time – supposing this were possible – would not tell you anything about the system, because that is not where the inner logic of socially necessary identities between labourer and commodity can actually be found. Still, current advocates of 'dark matter' in cosmological physics are in much the same position, and as with Marx's researches into actually existing economies, they are looking for evidence that supports their theory, itself derived from unobservables.

Overall, though, Marx's sophistication as a writer – and as a sardonic humourist – generates yet another interpretive puzzle: exactly when is he quoting and citing what he agrees with in the contemporary science of political economy, which he praises for setting problems and attempting solutions? And exactly when is he speaking in his own voice as a convinced critic and on-the-case political activist, excoriating political economy for its uncritical endorsement of bourgeois class power? Two things work against Marx here: he was assiduous in narrating political economy in order to set it up for a fall, but his way of generating that fall is itself easily mistaken for an amendment to political economy on its own terms. This is a well-known problem deriving from satire when – as a matter of genre – it takes the form of parody.

## **Commentators and Critics**

Unsurprisingly some commentators have dismissed Marx as a minor Ricardian, given that David Ricardo (1772–1823) is the political economist whose own conceptual exposition Marx's work most



closely resembles. Other commentators, and probably most readers, have simply taken Marx to be expounding a curiously mistaken ‘take’ on – or ponderously elaborated alternative to – the marginalist economics that succeeded his work, and largely replaced political economy, starting from the later 1870s. Much of Marx's critique is quite subtle satire, and – in the censored Young Hegelian political mode of the 1840s that he persisted with through succeeding decades – satire was the chief mode of radical critique and progressive activism. Indeed *Capital*, vol. 1, in its expository passages is something of an elaborated parody, i.e. taking political economy ‘very straight’ and at length, but then producing a devastating and in the end quite explosive *political* point of criticism. That point of criticism was the deductive conclusion that the inner logic of the system would produce a falling rate of profit, so that particular necessary constraint would tighten until a point of systemic contradiction would necessarily arise, but one resolvable in *political* terms.<sup>44</sup> A huge productive capacity would generate vast volumes of unsellable goods, precisely because machine-intensive technologies had replaced living workers in order to cut costs and therefore to set prices competitively. But without living workers employed in production, there would be no wages, and so very few consumers, hence a glut of unsellable goods.

Nonetheless the idea that capitalism is in some sense a system with an inner logic is not quite extinct. In particular this formulation arises as a problem-setting consideration when confronting the crises that occur and then enquiring into causes and strategies of prevention or amelioration. While very disparate and *ad hoc*, reasoning from economic disasters provokes a fix-the-system response, which in turn presupposes a system. There have certainly been changes of a systemic character: from the monetary gold standard to the Bretton Woods currency agreements, from fixed to floating exchange rates, from cartel-like restraints on trading in stocks and securities to the automated trading of financial instruments constituted by aggregating risks.<sup>45</sup>

It is possible to argue, however, that crises are endemic, inevitable and even worsening without committing oneself to the characteristically Marxian proposition that there is a logic to the system that – when exposed – will play an important part in a

profound political process of historical change in our socio-political relationships. In Marx's stated view, this change would itself be of a different order to previous ones, in that humanity would – through self-consciously executed rationality – take control of its destiny, worked out in social and political terms.<sup>46</sup> Or not: class struggles, as the *Manifesto* noted, could well end in the 'common ruin of the contending classes'.<sup>47</sup> In his historical researches into the extent of human malleability, and the concomitant structural malleabilities, Marx was certainly aware of regression. The modern equivalent is eco-disaster on a planetary scale, whether through pollution and mutation or through climate-change and water-wars.

Technological fixes to human problems were – as should be evident – really Marx's *forté*. In his view the productive potential of modern manufactures was malorganized because of the exploitation of labour and cycles of mass unemployment. However, through other structures – with a quite different inner logic – humanity could reap the benefits in a way that could be understood as, and supported as, egalitarian, and thus properly democratic. There is no particular reason why this political vision could not cope with the externalities of pollution and climate-change. Pollution, at least, makes an overt appearance in Marx's critique of capitalism as a system precisely as the kind of externality that modern economists do (at least sometimes) consider. These comments occur in considerations of poor working conditions and chronic ill-health and early death;<sup>48</sup> it was a hundred years from his time before clean air acts began to improve conditions substantially in major industrial countries. As an activist Marx supported numerous reformist measures, and did not take the line that political interventions should make things worse in order to make them better – which is different from noting that *others* might make matters worse and thus inadvertently provoke progressive changes. However, Marx also noted occasions when reformism failed, or was not even tried, and revolutionary violence arose – which of course did not always make things better.<sup>49</sup> In sum the Marxian idea that human creations have generated forces that – very directly, e.g. through marketized relationships – control human lives and generate tragic outcomes, is still very much with us.

In specific terms this idea achieves a stunning formulation in *Capital*, vol. 1, as revised by Marx after the first edition. Engels, and no doubt others, had complained that the opening exposition of the original book was hard to follow and needed expansion to aid the reader. One of Marx's amendments was to include the now-famous section 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof', though rather unfortunately the exact form of the argument Marx was making is often misunderstood. The fetishism reference is not to much later Freudian concepts but to an eighteenth-century work, *Cult of the Fetish Gods*.<sup>50</sup> The meaning is not the one of a peculiar sexual fascination for something. Rather Marx's reference is to the very specific idea that humans have practices through which their own creations come to control them, such as cults of idol worship. These practices have come into existence and in some cases have disappeared or been disavowed. So they are historically malleable, rather than necessary features of human social existence.

The original eighteenth-century coinage of the term 'fetishism' presented idol-worship as a social, institutional reality through which inanimate objects seemed to acquire the powers of animate beings. In Marx's version market relations, which had life-and-death powers over many, were similarly historical as malleable institutions, and similarly operative through god-like powers attributed to coin in particular, and money-relations generally.<sup>51</sup> Marx livened his text up with numerous satirical references to religions, including specific references to Christianity, superstitions and con-tricks, making his point that belief in the naturalness, necessity and immutability of market-relationships, and thus in the trio commodity, money and capital, was obviously irrational. At the same time, he was not so naive as to presume that the exposure of irrationalism by an intellectual such as himself was sufficient in itself to make capitalism fall, or even to reform it somewhat.<sup>52</sup> As with all social formations, whether idol-worship, market-worship, or communism as a classless, but highly productive society, Marx's presumption was performative: people need to make it happen, and politics arises as interventions – in and through class struggle – to accomplish this or alternatively to prevent it.<sup>53</sup>

## Marx and Revolution

Revolution was a far from simple consideration for Marx, and indeed what it was supposed to mean was never discussed definitively.

There is another paradox here: Marx was very much on the side of a profound revolution in human social history, working through his activism to raise awareness of this possibility; however, how this possibility might arise, and where and when and with what result, was – so far as we can tell – quite open-ended in his mind. What he did say is generally of the ‘revolution to come’ genre, or alternatively of the genre the ‘revolution that failed’. The former is hortatory rather than predictive, in that the rhetoric usually declares the existence of a factual situation as a way of convincing listeners or readers to make it happen and thus to become fact. Marx writes as a political insider, not as an uninvolved observer who might hazard a prediction more in the manner of a social scientist, or possibly an objective journalist.<sup>54</sup> On the ‘revolution to come’ tack the most quoted examples over the years come of course from the *Manifesto*:

... we traced the more or less hidden civil war within existing society up to the point where it breaks out into open revolution, and the proletariat establishes its rule through the forcible overthrow of the bourgeoisie.<sup>55</sup>

But recently with the recirculation and English translation of Marx's early published ‘Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction’ this passage is often cited:

The only *practically* possible emancipation of Germany is the emancipation based on the unique theory which holds that man is the supreme being for man ... The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*. Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat; the proletariat cannot be abolished without the actualisation of philosophy.<sup>56</sup>

The ‘revolution that failed’ genre contains an expected dilemma, namely the *post mortem* on failures of 1848–9 across Europe, and of 1869–70 in Paris, but turns swiftly into the hopefully performative rhetorical mode sketched above. Marx's evocation of the ‘June Days’

of 1848 in his contemporary pamphlet of 1852, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, is not often quoted, but is indicative of the dilemma: how to describe a political failure without failing the political cause. Marx's account puts a particular construction – no doubt debateable – on the urban uprising of February 1848 that overthrew King Louis Philippe of the French:

The original intention in the February days [of 1848] was for an electoral reform through which the circle of political privilege amongst the possessing classes was to be widened ... so the republic appeared [and] the proletariat set its stamp upon it and proclaimed it a social republic. Thus the general content of the modern revolution was signalled.<sup>57</sup>

Following Marx's account we learn that the other political forces – of the propertied classes in various gradations and with various symbolic commitments – put paid to the social demands that 'the Paris proletariat' had expressed, as Marx tells us. The 'June insurrection [of 1848]' was in reply 'the most colossal event in the history of European civil wars', he writes. The result, in Marx's estimation, selectively derived from press reports, was that '3000 insurgents were massacred' and '15,000 were transported without trial'. Whatever the circumstances and figures, there was undoubtedly an insurrection and undoubtedly a defeat of the insurgents, hence a problem for Marx writing as an activist:

To be sure the defeat of the June insurgents had prepared level ground for founding and constructing the bourgeois republic; but it had demonstrated at the same time that in Europe the question of today is something other than 'republic or monarchy'. It had proved that *bourgeois republic* means the unlimited despotism of one class over the others.<sup>58</sup>

Marx explains exactly what this means, showing how 'Red scares' are used to create dictatorships, such that even propertied classes lose their security because they lose their 'bourgeois' freedoms:

Even the simplest demand for bourgeois financial reform, for the most ordinary liberalism, for the most formal republicanism, for the most basic democracy, is simultaneously castigated as an ‘outrage to society’ and stigmatised as ‘socialism’... Finally the scum of bourgeois society forms the *holy phalanx of order* and the hero Crapulinski [Louis Bonaparte] seizes the [royal palace of the] Tuileries as ‘*saviour of society*’.<sup>59</sup>

The rather similar account of urban insurrection in Paris in Marx's *The Civil War in France* is more often quoted, though generally on the hopeful side,<sup>60</sup> where Marx discerns an outline of a future society within the ephemeral structures of an uprising. However, Marx was adept at turning an abject defeat – at the hands of vastly superior forces – into a victory by means of very telling sarcasms, of which this is one:

The working men's Paris, in the act of its heroic self-holocaust, involved in its flames buildings and monuments ... If the acts of the Paris working men were vandalism, it was the vandalism of defence in despair ... The Commune knew that its opponents cared nothing for the lives of the Paris people, but cared much for their own Paris buildings.<sup>61</sup>

However, turning to an on-going set of revolutions during 1848, we find Marx working as a journalist/activist when the revolution is not precisely ‘to come’, because it has already started. But the revolution has not obviously failed, either, since in on-going events as they happen there are no foregone conclusions. As editor-in-chief of his revived newspaper, now the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung – Organ der Demokratie*, and with Engels on the editorial board, Marx was in his element. The paper covered the ‘June Days’ in Paris as reports came in:

Cologne, June 24, 10 p.m. Letters of the 23<sup>rd</sup> from Paris have failed to arrive. A courier who has passed through Cologne has told us that when he left fighting had broken out in Paris between the people and the national guard, and that he had heard heavy cannon-fire ...<sup>62</sup>

A few days later in the paper we have ‘News from Paris’, written by Marx in a ‘cheerleading’ mode aimed at the local audience in the



Rhineland:

*Cologne*, June 26. The news just received from Paris takes up so much space that we are obliged to omit all articles of critical comment ... The latest news received ... is ... *Paris bathed in blood; the insurrection growing into the greatest revolution that has ever taken place, into a revolution of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie*. Three days which sufficed for the *July revolution* [of 1830] and the *February revolution* [earlier in 1848] are insufficient for the colossal contours of this *June revolution*, but the *victory of the people is more certain than ever*.<sup>63</sup>

But by the 28th Marx had gone into praising the dead while keeping the revolution alive:

The workers of Paris were *overwhelmed* by superior strength, but they were not *subdued*. They have been *defeated* but their enemies are *vanquished* ... It is the *right* and the *privilege of the democratic press* to place laurels on their ... brow.<sup>64</sup>

Interestingly this is from the article that was excerpted as an exemplary summary and historical account as early as 1850, thus removing Marx somewhat in the reader's eye from the fray of revolutionary activism and putting him in the rhetorical position of making the best of failure. It was then picked up in an English translation of 1851 in the Chartist weekly *Notes to the People*, and ultimately published in the 1895 short volume edited by Engels *The Class Struggles in France*.<sup>65</sup>

There is nothing particularly inconsistent between reading Marx's views in sequence as events happen and his assessments read more historically as after-the-fact. But the positioning of Marx as always commenting on failed revolutions does make his consistency seem rather formulaic and 'applied' instead of exploratory and engaged. Of course numerous other interventions by other writers of a similar and contrasting character were taking place at the time in 1848 as events unfolded. These accounts are perhaps accessible still in archives, available in specialist collections or otherwise in limited circulation and attracting limited interest. Marx's work has benefited from his name-branding as other writers have not. But the cost has

been an orientation of readers to his writing that is focused on consistencies of 'thought' rather than on activities and activism.

In the final chapter of this book we consider the concept that – since the late 1960s – has taken pride of place in presenting Marx's 'thought' to the academic and general public: alienation. However, in terms of Marx's activism, that concept was overtaken tactically by another one, namely exploitation, so the two will be considered together.

## Notes

1. Nor has communism entirely disappeared from the landscape; see Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012).
2. See [Chapter 1](#) 'Making Marx "Marx" '.
3. Anne Lopes and Gary Roth, *Men's Feminism: August Bebel and the German Socialist Movement* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), pp. 99, 107 n. 45.
4. For an overview, see Michael Edwards (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Civil Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
5. As we saw in [Chapter 2](#) 'Class Struggle and Class Compromise'.
6. *LPW* 158–9; *CW* 29: 261–2.
7. See [Chapter 4](#) 'Democracy and Socialism/Communism'.
8. For a 'Reader's Guide', see David Rose, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (London: Continuum, 2011); Marx was also notably reading classic works of republican thinking, e.g. Machiavelli, Rousseau, and historical studies on the United States, Poland, Sweden, Venice and so on; Leopold, *Young Karl Marx*, pp. 32–3, and *passim*.
9. See [Chapter 2](#) 'Class Struggle and Class Compromise'.
10. *Politics* 1258a19–1258b8.
11. See [Chapter 3](#) 'History and Progress'.

- [12.](#) See *The Wealth of Nations*, bk 1, ch. vi (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 150–7.
- [13.](#) For a detailed discussion, see Terrell Carver, ‘Marx – and Engels’s “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy”’, *History of Political Thought* 4:2 (1983): 357–65.
- [14.](#) For a detailed treatment of the relationship between Marx’s notebooks of 1844 and posthumously published ‘manuscripts’ of 1844, see Rojahn, ‘Emergence of a Theory’.
- [15.](#) CW 3: 375–6.
- [16.](#) CW 3: 375.
- [17.](#) CW 3: 418, 443
- [18.](#) Carver, *Texts on Method*, pp. 9–37, reviews these plans in detail.
- [19.](#) CW 35: 45.
- [20.](#) Locke, ‘Second’ *Treatise of Civil Government*, in *Two Treatises of Civil Government*, ed. Peter Laslett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 291.
- [21.](#) See [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Communism/Socialism’.
- [22.](#) ‘Proletariat/ian’ as a loan word from French into German, and later into ‘Marxist’ political rhetoric, poses issues in English similar to those I have identified with the terms ‘bourgeois/ie’ (as opposed to ‘commercial classes’), hence the use of ‘working class’ here and subsequently.
- [23.](#) For an explication of this concept, see Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012 [1962]).
- [24.](#) For an overview, see for example Heinz D. Kurz, *Economic Thought: A Brief History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); see also [Chapter 6](#) ‘Exploitation and Alienation’.
- [25.](#) See [Chapter 2](#) ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’.

- [26.](#) For discussion on this point, see Manfred B. Steger (ed.), *Rethinking Globalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).
- [27.](#) See the analytically sharp discussion in Leo Panitch, ‘The Two Revolutionary Classes of the Manifesto’, in Carver and Farr (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to the Communist Manifesto*, pp. 122–33.
- [28.](#) <http://www.theotherpages.org/alpha-r2.html>; the Trump administration is considered the wealthiest in United States history, according to *The New York Times* [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/04/01/us/politics/how-much-people-in-the-trump-administration-are-worth-financial-disclosure.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/04/01/us/politics/how-much-people-in-the-trump-administration-are-worth-financial-disclosure.html?_r=0)
- [29.](#) This argument was made at length by Friedrich von Hayek in his extensive published work; it is also the opposite of Marx’s view, detailed in [Chapter 2](#) ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’, that the imbrication of wealth and commercialism in democratic institutions is inherently suspect.
- [30.](#) There are any number of critiques of neo-classical ‘equilibrium’ economics roughly along these lines, including the new institutional economics, heterodox economics and the ‘alternative economics’ syllabus, among others.
- [31.](#) CW 35: e.g. 517–19, 586.
- [32.](#) For an impressive attempt to situate *Capital* as a political intervention into contemporary socialist politics, see Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*.
- [33.](#) Most texts and translations today derive posthumously from Engels’s re-edited and annotated fourth German edition (1890).
- [34.](#) Marx to Engels, 24 November 1857; CW 40: 208; text in small caps is in the original English (and in further quotations following this convention).
- [35.](#) CW 40: 208–9.
- [36.](#) CW 40: 209.

37. The philosophical sense of ‘accident’ in Aristotelian terms: a non-essential feature of an object; the term goes with ‘final cause’ and ‘substance’, also in the passage.
38. CW 15: 401; published 15 December 1857.
39. See the discussion in Carver, *Texts on Method*, pp. 134–5.
40. CW 35: esp. 157–66.
41. [*vergegenständlich* = objectified; *materialisiert* = materialized]; CW 35: esp. 166–86.
42. ‘The labour time socially necessary [to produce a commodity] is that required ... under normal conditions of production, and with the average degree of skill and intensity prevalent at the time’, thus avoiding the obvious paradox that slow and efficient work-times would (somehow) create articles of higher value than efficient working would; CW 35: 49.
43. CW 35: e.g. 307–16; for an updated presentation and discussion, see Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho, *Marx’s ‘Capital’*, 6th edn (London: Pluto, 2016 [1975]).
44. CW 35: esp. 748–51; Marx’s proffered resolution – proletarian revolution – was of course performative, i.e. a reality that had to be made through class-based politics.
45. See the discussion in Panitch and Gindin, *Making of Global Capitalism*, pp. 89–107.
46. CW 29: 263–4.
47. LPW 1–2; CW 6: 482.
48. CW 35: 374–508.
49. See the discussion of Marx’s views on the Paris Commune in [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Communism/Socialism’.
50. Charles de Brosses, *Du Culte des dieux fétiches* (Paris, 1760); see the discussion in Carver, *Texts on Method*, p. 175 n.

- [51.](#) See the discussion in Carver, *Texts on Method*, pp. 11, 175 n. 9.
- [52.](#) Marx explicitly acknowledged that the gap between publishing a scientific discovery about society (which claimed to do in *Capital*, vol. 1) and altering the social practice (which that scientific discovery de-mystifies) is a political one; *CW* 35: 86.
- [53.](#) This view is presented in detail in Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), ch. 1.
- [54.](#) See the discussion of ‘abstracting’ and predictive reading strategies in relation to Marx in [Chapter 3](#) ‘History and Progress’.
- [55.](#) *LPW* 11; *CW* 6: 495.
- [56.](#) *EPW* 70; *CW* 3: 187; emphasis in original.
- [57.](#) *LPW* 37; *CW* 11: 109.
- [58.](#) *LPW* 39; *CW* 11: 111.
- [59.](#) *LPW* 40; *CW* 11: 112; see the discussion in [Chapter 3](#) ‘History and Progress’.
- [60.](#) As we saw above in [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Communism/Socialism’
- [61.](#) *LPW* 203–4; *CW* 22: 350–1.
- [62.](#) *CW* 7: 121.
- [63.](#) *CW* 7: 128; emphasis in original.
- [64.](#) *CW* 7: 144, 149; emphasis in original.
- [65.](#) *CW* 10: 45–145.



## 6

# Exploitation and Alienation

Exploitation is a highly contentious concept in today's politics, where the economy tends to dominate public policy and debate or, at least, alternative dominating issues, such as national identity, almost always refer back to economics.<sup>1</sup> Even in public policy areas where income and wealth aren't the immediate points of contention, exploitation has a conceptual 'reach' over and above such concerns as wage-rates, working conditions and employer 'benefits' (or the lack thereof). Unequal power relations and their misuse by economic elites crop up in controversies related to sexual politics and sexual practice, in relation to overuse and unsustainability in environmental politics, and generally with regard to situations in which someone or something is said to be 'taking advantage' and/or 'being unfair'. Exploitation is a moralized and moralizing concept, but it is often tested against objective assessments of what is fair and reasonable, particularly in legal discourse and judicial decisions. Conversely it would be envisioned as absent by definition if power-relations became egalitarian, or – if still unequal, as in parental or other caring roles – this power-differential could be said to exist for good reasons.<sup>2</sup>

Alternatively the concept is sometimes viewed as merely moralizing, with no objective content. On this view exploitation adds nothing but an emotional charge to a discussion, and cooler, clearer heads should be adverting to a situation without it and so using concepts and arguments that sit nicely within the sphere of justice instead. Within this 'procedural' view of justice, lawful transfers of property (whether in objects and money, or in one's person and labour-time) are 'just', provided that force and violence are excluded from the transaction and that exchanges proceed with informed consent among all parties. On this basis inegalitarian outcomes in terms of power and resources are to be expected, and indeed such outcomes are representative of a 'free' and productive economic system. Inequality thus represents – ideally speaking – both prospective incentives and

retroactive rewards. So in this picture, either unequal outcomes are the result of 'free' transfers and therefore 'just', or if transfers are really 'unfree', then – and only then – are the outcomes 'unjust'. From this analytical and justice-related perspective, activist use of the concept of exploitation is necessarily suspect, and in particular likely to imply some acquaintance with Marxism.

Marxists, who use the concept of exploitation in a specifically defined sense quite different from the procedural view outlined above, have also characteristically rejected morality and moralizing, often appealing to objectivities in science, rationality and logic that are held to be a clearer guide to a better politics than hortatory rhetoric. Marx himself scorned other radicals who operated as moralizers within given frameworks, such as Christianity, or drafted up moral systems of their own. However, operating as an activist, he himself was not overly interested in providing an academically rigorous defence of his own political reasoning such that his position in relation to – rather than a simple rejection of – commonplace 'morality' would stand up to close scrutiny. Marxists, whether in some strong or weak sense of the term, have thus laboured mightily on just this kind of intellectually worrying issue: if Marx (really) rejected moralizing discourse and universalizing principles, what then is the (sound) basis for his highly judgemental concept of exploitation?

As one might expect with such discussions the outcome is generally regarded as inconclusive: Marx rejected moralizing frameworks and political appeals thereto, but used morally referential terminology because he had very strong opinions on class-divided social systems through which – for woefully insufficient reasons, so he argued – some people labour for the benefit of others, or simply languish in poverty, as do their children, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

The term 'exploitation' is certainly current in today's politics in any number of senses, but it follows from the political history recounted above that it is controversial in several ways. In current contexts of class and gender politics, for instance, it is highly contentious: Are wage-bargains, or sexual relationships, taking place in situations of freely exchanged resources? Or are they taking place in circumstances of constraint derived from class-power or gender-

power as persisting structures of inequality? And if the latter, and if the latter instances are malleable, does exploitation correctly render the situation in factual terms, or moral terms, or both?<sup>4</sup> Does a moral account of a situation that finds it wanting thus licence moralizing activisms? Are low-paid, ‘zero-hours’, ‘gig-economy’, ‘casualized’ or ‘adjunct’ workers exploited? Do household economies on the one hand, and privatized childcare on the other, cause women to be exploited? Alternatively, is exploitation a factually correct, or at least defensible, or even politically useful way to advocate amelioration, reform, fairness, justice, redress or revolution?

The ‘social question’<sup>5</sup> was framed as already a moral and political question. And characteristic answers – or alternatively complete dismissals – were similarly framed. A ‘fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work’, ‘just rewards’ for all, a ‘fair deal’ for workers and the like are common currency in politics, and have been for generations of critics, reformers and revolutionaries since Marx’s time. Marx worked on this problem as the key issue intellectually and practically in getting to grips *politically* with the ‘social question’. And eventually he resolved it *intellectually* to his own (and to some people’s) satisfaction. But along the way, and against his own approach, he inadvertently but necessarily raised the issue of the philosophical and moral basis for his conceptual argumentation. Marx himself has thus become a point of contention in any discussion of exploitation at all, or by degrees, and his presence in these debates has itself become an argument for dismissing the concept altogether. Alternatively, his presence in these debates is often taken as a reason why the concept has at least some validity as well as political ‘reach’, so this chapter necessarily proceeds on that basis.

## Revolutionary Reformations

However, Marx’s political stance as an activist was always a peculiar one in certain respects. It is thus necessary to set that context up before moving on to a view of the ‘social question’ – and its resolution – as plausibly hinging on a concept of exploitation that has more to it than an emotional charge. From his first days in contact with ‘material interests’ on the *Rheinische Zeitung* editorial

collective Marx opted for a commitment to social, public or collective control of resources (in some sense) rather than to individually held 'private property' in land, labour and capital.<sup>6</sup> This was both a hypothesis derived from rational thinking about contemporary circumstances and – in Marx's view – a process of actualization occurring in and through present political confrontations, though not very much in the German states of his time. What awakening there was in relation to the 'social question' in the German states was further along among philosophers than it was in terms of structural change in the economy. As already mentioned,<sup>7</sup> Marx categorically eschewed systems and gurus specifically by name and in general and, moreover, he wrote scornfully about moralizing doctrines and redemptive religions in relation to communism.<sup>8</sup> This left him short of political tools and rhetorical devices that others were using – with much greater success – in the democratizing struggles through which constitutionalism was being achieved in central and eastern Europe, and elsewhere.

Moreover, to make matters even more difficult, Marx and Engels were determinedly historical 'all the way down' in their approach, as they worked to formulate their 'outlook' or 'conception'.<sup>9</sup> This means that all intellectual phenomena, morals included, cannot exist in any other way than in the practical, social context through which human beings live their lives in given circumstances. This is not to claim, nor convincingly to demonstrate, that moral principles are uniquely determined by, or could be deduced from, socio-economic activities in 'everyday' custom and practice. Rather the strong claim made by the two was that such principles, typically understood as commonplace morality, could not be presumed to be timelessly 'apart' from human experience. Such principles cannot, as most people claimed, constitute a non-malleable realm to which humans must – as a matter of moral obligation – conform, whether divine or supernatural sanctions were actually forthcoming or not. The obvious targets here were religions and supernatural beings altogether, but also including philosophers expounding 'eternal' truths as well as moralizing reformers and 'cranks' of all descriptions, most particularly self-styled 'communist' ones. For Marx and Engels, as notably expressed in the *Manifesto*, their stance represented an act of considerable liberation in the history of

humankind, given that they viewed 'historyless' principles and 'timeless' truths to be mere opportunities for some people to hoodwink and oppress others. However, a corollary was that their stance as historicists would necessarily have to be both individual and social in order to circulate through a given population and to be effective in causing change. To be effective, their historicizing 'outlook' would have to be political on a wide scale, and could not simply be a personal conviction or minor cult. This made their ambition one of effecting a democratic politics, or rather a politics that could only be democratic in scale, given its sweeping objectives. But this broadly scaled and historically significant politics would also have to be founded on autonomous judgements made by individuals, as opposed to guru-like authority transcendent over individuality, in order for a coherent movement to arise rationally.<sup>10</sup> As the ebullient Marx wrote in a published broadside of 1844: "The weapon of criticism certainly cannot replace the criticism made by weapons; material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory, too, becomes a material force once it seizes the masses."<sup>11</sup>

Certainly this rationalist orientation caused Marx considerable frustration throughout his lifetime as an activist, and it was also frustrating for those who wanted to adhere to him and his views in a conventional leader/follower model. Marx as an activist was always more of a 'tendency' than a party, or even a clique; the moment of glory for the proto-'Communist Party', for which the *Manifesto* was written, arrived only retrospectively 25 years later, beginning in 1872,<sup>12</sup> as the organizational and unifying structures of a mass socialist party in imperial Germany began to arise and gain strength. Marx's politics was coalitional,<sup>13</sup> but then he was not a sought-after partner for very many who wanted to 'coalesce' with him. However, what echoes for us in today's activism is the spectre of an *imputed* morality, moral principles and moral foundations for his politics generally, albeit of the 'gut reaction' variety. Marx's conception of exploitation, which does in fact have quite a precise definition in his theorization of the 'capitalist mode of production' [*kapitalistische Produktionsweise*], figures within this general reception, but as we will see below, it requires a specialist introduction in order to grasp the specifics, rather than just the moral tone.

## Morality and Justice

The problem of morality was already there in Marx's life and thinking from the beginning of his local activisms. But when his engagement with the 'social question', as he worked it out, began to turn on his criticism of social justice, the problem for him became particularly acute. Justice was a key slogan in the language of reformers and revolutionaries alike. Justice as fairness in relation to work, wages and welfare was a powerful rallying cry, and the moralized principles and practices of egalitarian exchange, exemplified in allegedly unforced, fully consensual and mutually beneficial transfers of value in market transactions, were well established in popular parlance and everyday accounts of wage-bargaining. Marx's more analytical and intellectually subtle analysis of this supposed equality was inexplicable politically to many, intellectually intelligible to only a few, and ultimately quite difficult even for Marx himself to get across. And with the principal exposition of this occurring in *Capital*, vol. 1, it limited his audience quite severely. While Marx gave some semi-public lectures in the IWMA context of international activism (posthumously collected as *Value, Price and Profit*)<sup>14</sup> the political 'reach' of his message contracted very considerably with this kind of material and this mode of engagement, and these expository accounts did not figure in any more substantial way in the coalitional politics he pursued in the later 1860s. In so far as this effort in the international politics of democratization – pursued in the particular interests of working-class people – was distinctive, valuable and productive, it proceeded somewhat apart from his lifetime project in constructing the definitive critique of political economy, at least in practice, though certainly not in spirit.

Given the necessarily broad and coalitional character of the IWMA that rather frustrating stance would obviously follow, even though most accounts of its organizational history – and particularly those accounts that focus on Marx – have emphasized the 'sectarian strife' that occurred in debates and private correspondence. That kind of expository focus proceeds rather at the expense of the 'compromise' agreements and statements through which the organization actually worked.<sup>15</sup> Marx's critique was perforce supposed by him to provide



the definitive debunking of the commonplace moralizing – e.g. about ‘just’ prices, ‘fair’ exchanges and ‘living’ wages – through which capitalist relations of production actually operated. But the IWMA was not, and could not have been, his own vehicle for the specifics of his critique.

Marx's resolution of the ‘social question’ was developed through a critique of capitalism as a system, understood performatively.<sup>16</sup> This means that the abstract structures of concepts through which his theorizations proceed do not describe a set of practices that are ‘already there’ as objects of study. Rather the abstract structures in his work demonstrate how the practices (which of course already involve the researcher as an everyday human and as an intellectually alert critic) are themselves constituted as what they are in and through the concepts that the contemporary science of political economy presented as accurately descriptive and explanatory. The descriptive concepts are thus descriptive only because they are already constitutive of what they then purport merely to describe. Marx's performative ‘take’ on capitalism also incorporates the critical perspective of the researcher into the object of study, and further removes the supposed distance between scientific and everyday concepts that objective description and explanation is said to require. Hence the technical concepts of political economy are understood by Marx to be versions of the everyday ones commonly used and easily observed, just more precisely stated, but without the crucial critical edge that his performative ‘take’ presumes: everyday terms and technical concepts are not simply descriptive of ‘what is’, but are rather indicators of the inherent malleability of social structures, relationships and practices. Or put very simply, alternative and quite different concepts would be descriptively and technically true, if we made them true, in and through our social activities as we undertake and understand them.

Marx's work on his definitive critique has two distinctive and innovative aspects that he himself picked out, though one is consequent upon the other. The consequent aspect – popularly known as the theory of surplus value – is much better known than the prior conceptual ‘move’, which was a shift of focus from exchange to production. This was quite a significant first step in theorizing the economy, conceived as the necessary and importantly ‘conditioning’

mode through which other human social activities arise.<sup>17</sup> Political economy, and similarly modern economics, generally theorize from principles of individualized exchange of resources through a sell/buy utility calculus working to individual but also mutual advantage. Obviously this scenario depends on a concept of production, whether of a good or service, as otherwise exchange would not make sense, supposing – in the first place – that such a utility calculus is something intrinsic to humans in their social lives.

Marx turned this historic and still familiar approach around on logical and experiential grounds, arguing strongly for beginning any kind of theorizing about society and politics from the sphere of production. He did this in and through an early Young Hegelian vocabulary and perspective,<sup>18</sup> as well as in and through a later vocabulary derived from the political economy of French and British authorities, who were by Marx's time highly regarded as the authors of classics in 'natural philosophy', having an impact in statecraft. Politically, though, in the German states, where feudal property and authoritarian monarchs lingered, such irreligious and foreign free-thinking was not welcomed, and was anyway stigmatized as close to subversion. This rejection arose because of the commercial 'everyman' scenarios of mutual exchange in political economy, as opposed to Christian hierarchies of God/Nature/Man, and because of its focus on this-worldly 'material' – as opposed to spiritual – values of wealth creation and accumulation, whether at the individual or the national level. Viewing the world through the eyes of political economy aligned Marx with foreigners, such as French revolutionaries of the past and present, with radicals who objected to church/state authoritarian hierarchies, and with the merely 'bourgeois', money-making classes, who were pushing for changes to the restrictive legal and political systems persisting from the middle ages.

For all this radicalism, though, Marx added his own twist: his theorizations presumed the human importance of, and logical precedence of, the process of production and the social relationships – of whatever character – through which these quintessentially 'economic' processes took place. This view works as well with putative societies of hunter-gatherers as it does with the classical and contemporary slave-owning societies (of which there was better

historical evidence); Marx was particularly scornful of *Robinsonaden*, i.e. ‘just-so’ stories of individualized and micro-social production and technological ‘invention’.<sup>19</sup> It also works with aristocratically titled landlords and feudal farming tenants, and with the more commercially productive employer–employee relationships that were developing apace in the German states. The ‘production’ perspective is quite general, and in Marx’s hands it was presuppositional to the – supposedly – more interesting and pertinent realm of exchange-relations, which is the point from which political economy and modern economics generally begin.

The political and theoretical consequences of this ‘move’ were highly significant, and form the framework within which Marx’s consequent innovation makes the most sense. Presuming equal exchangers as (apparently) equal utility calculators effectively removes an inequality in power-relations from the initial presumptions and founding scenarios of a descriptive analysis of society. If the society was propertyless – at least in terms of individual, ‘private’ ownership, and so egalitarian and ‘collective’ in character – and thus limited or self-limiting in productive capacity, then such an initial presumption of equal individuals would make some sense. However, taken as a template for a society in which private property in resources accumulates in some hands much more than in the hands of others, this picture aroused in Marx, as indeed in Engels’s early ‘*Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*’, a stinging line of criticism.<sup>20</sup> The scenario was not simply untrue to obvious economic facts on the street or in the fields concerning work and reward, and to similarly obvious differentials in power derived from differing amounts of resources, it was also a fiction that was far too convenient for those wielding their accumulations of resources in market exchanges and financial investments. Those with far fewer, or in extreme cases no resources at all other than bodily labour – which might not of course find a buyer, anyway – were obviously in a situation of relative disadvantage.

Merely pointing out this discrepancy – between mythology and reality, between moralized equality and human neediness – was not in itself a huge innovation, as indeed the ‘social question’ was largely formulated in just those terms.<sup>21</sup> Marx’s innovation was to address a

scenario of unequal access to productive resources, i.e. objects typically 'enclosed' by physical or legal barriers as 'private' property, as an exchange scenario of *inequality* at the outset, given the historical circumstances of 'private' property systems, and the winding up of feudal-era commoners' property rights and similar shared rights of use, particularly in the German states of his time. His approach historicized and contextualized the constituent concepts of political economy in something much more like the everyday terms of commonplace exchanges in actually existing markets and marketized relationships, but most especially the labour-market, including customary bonded or indentured forms of service, and only minimal (and often highly dehumanizing) provision for 'the poor'. A mutually beneficial exchange of utilities between equally independent calculators on that market – where worker meets employer, in some guise – looks much less obviously plausible than the purported plausibility – as with Adam Smith, for instance – of conceptualizing the economy in terms of 'savages' exchanging beaver for fish in order to fulfil their individual consumption preferences in some apparently timeless setting of quite abstract 'scarcity'.<sup>22</sup>

The crucial moralized argument through which political economy proceeded was the presupposition that property is individually acquired and thus sanctified, in some religious or physical sense, or both, as 'private' to the labouring individual in the first instance. Whether this was defined as the virtuous addition of goods and services to the natural economy of God's creation, or as the abstinence of pleasurable consumption such that labouring then produces a concomitant reward, does not particularly matter. Marx's empirical argument was borne out through graphic reference to working conditions and to economic crises, particularly as recounted in Engels's early works, which inspired Marx and that he credited in his autobiographical Preface of 1859 and in *Capital*, vol. 1.<sup>23</sup> Their argument was that inequalities would increase, and thus further differentials in power – as command over resources – would necessarily follow. Accumulations of private property following on from monetary exchange would then magnify the power-disparities, particularly when access to land for subsistence farming – as a fall-back mode of bare life and minimal existence – was denied. Higher

productivity ‘factory farm’ methods were already available to innovating landowners of the time, and feudal-tenancies producing at near-subsistence level were distinctly unattractive to entrepreneurial ambitions.

## Value and Profit

These presuppositions and this line of analysis then raise the issue of profit – deriving from supposedly equal and therefore mutually beneficial exchanges of valued objects that the political economists had encountered and analysed.<sup>24</sup> I note here that their political critics were composed as much of the traditional religious orders upset about idleness and usury as they were of any radicals defining this issue as the nub of the ‘social question’. Indeed anti-modernist religious movements then and now have often been very successful politically, or at least highly influential at times. Perhaps rather foolishly most political economists had opted for a view that profit arising through productive labour, and protected through a system of private property underpinning monetary exchange, arose somehow *both* from equal exchange *and* from human labour. Aristotle had long before suggested this as a possible answer to the question of equality-in-exchange: how are usable objects exchangeable at all by means of money, which must – so he reasoned – imply a common standard in virtue of which two quite different objects can be equalized? But Aristotle then rejected labour – or indeed any necessary and essential commonality in exchanges at all, other than rough-and-ready reckoning.<sup>25</sup>

However, this Aristotelian move into uncertainty and indeterminacy was not accepted by influential political economists, who kept searching for a solution to the conundrum. As it happens, solving this problem would also mimic – and moralize – the exchange relationship between employer/entrepreneur/property-owner and landless workers selling their labour-time by the year, by the day, by the hour, or by piecework. The crucial element in the moralizing rhetoric of this discourse was of course market-equality, predicated on freely willed and unforced exchanges. The inequality of outcome, though, appeared to mock the claimed equality of values-in-exchange and the putative equality of power between the exchangers.



Money and power had been accumulating at a great rate in the hands of those who were the employers/entrepreneurs/property-owners but at a much lesser rate amongst the labouring classes, though upward mobility was not – as had been the case in feudal times – legally and morally quite so constrained. So for the political economists, if exchanges and exchangers were equal at the outset, what then accounted for the discrepancy at the outcome? Was it the just reward for abstinence from present consumption, or the danger of the risks undertaken, that made property-owners so deserving? Or was it the character – in some contrary ‘undeserving’ sense – of the property-less that made their labour, rather than abstinence or risk, so much less rewarding, and that also made their lives so much less secure?

Some readers found these differing answers offered by the political economists more agreeable than others, but then this mixed reception merely restated the problem as a more general political issue. The resolution was conceived in various ways within the intertwined terms of politics and morality, taking the former to be concerned with power in the very broadest sense, and the latter to be concerned with the valuation of human acts and activities, also in the broadest sense. Marx seems to have come to his own conceptual key to a resolution of the problem of profit some time in 1847, at least in very rough outline,<sup>26</sup> though owing to the geographical and financial helter-skelter of the subsequent revolutionary events and their aftermath well into the 1850s, he had little time to pursue his ‘write-up’ until later in the decade, beginning in earnest in 1857. And indeed – true to his mammoth and synoptic ambitions in constructing a persuasively theoretical and thoroughly historicized critique of capitalist relations of production – his first published effort was quite a slim and modestly titled half-volume, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, of 1859.<sup>27</sup>

However, Marx's engagement with this problem was very much on the home territory of political economy as he conceived of it in a summary and synoptic manner. Politically this would seem to be a clever move – take the politically potent political economists prisoner on their own territory. And he worked to take them prisoner in two distinct ways: logically as natural philosophers, working within what were then classical understandings of natural (i.e.



material) and artificial (i.e. human) phenomena. But he also saw them in a dual position as ideologues for the interests of the commercial classes: as rebels against authoritarian monarchists, but also as – by imputation – at oppressors of the working classes, given their advocacy of commercialization through market-relationships.

Marx and Engels had already written, and quite extensively so in the *Manifesto*, a critique of ‘bourgeois hypocrisy’ in relation to moralizing – but self-serving – accounts of abstinence, risk-taking and other proffered justifications for the exclusivity attached to property ownership and its judicial defence through the invocation of legal penalties, including incarceration and capital punishment.<sup>28</sup> In their view this systematic disparity in power concentrated control over resources in agriculture and manufacture in the hands of elites such that workers’ livelihoods could only depend on their ‘betters’ in all-too-obvious social-hierarchical and factually evident financial terms. The language of ideology, deployed to encompass this hypocrisy, was largely dropped by Marx after the mid 1840s, since at that point the term itself related in a methodological way to his critical attacks on the political presumptions of certain German idealist philosophers who were writing as self-styled radicals.<sup>29</sup> The ideas behind the concept of ideology, understood as a critical approach to the ‘social question’, though, clearly survive in the *Manifesto*, and in terms of political attack – the *raison d’être* of that text – the concepts that Marx and Engels actually use there license one of their best rhetorical modes, that of sarcasm.<sup>30</sup>

There were at least two unforeseen risks to which Marx’s critical strategy was subject. One was the way that political economy – and the presuppositions of natural philosophy – could not last forever and were in fact quite quickly swept away by the ‘marginalist revolution’ that created modern economics in the later 1870s. And another was the way that the overtly political character of his critical sarcasms – even if barely concealed and only occasionally explicit – grated against the somewhat later fact/value distinction, from which modern economics – as a self-styled objective social science – has generally benefited. This is to say that Marx’s conception of the problem of profit, in relation to the ‘social question’, makes the best sense when taken on his own presuppositions. But, as we’ve seen,<sup>31</sup> it

follows that subsequent presuppositions – down to our own in the present – make it difficult to see the exact relevance of every proposition within his argumentative reasoning. Nonetheless it is open to us to see the point of some of his conclusions, and possibly use those within our own terms today, without being unduly concerned to defend each and every point through which the argument proceeds.

However – and in brief – here is Marx's argument.<sup>32</sup> Production necessarily involves human labour and physical objects. Labour, understood at the outset as a physical phenomenon and a property of individual human bodies, is measured – in principle, anyway – in terms of expenditure over time, and as a substance it is fixed or 'materialized' in the resultant products. As a substance it is both in the labourer as a potential and in the products that labourers create in actuality. In Marx's terms, and as understood in natural philosophy, material objects change qualitatively through production when – after a physical process – they become usable products. Using a product, and valuing it for its utility, are purely qualitative exercises, so the classical argument goes, whereas valuing a product for its worth in exchange for a qualitatively different product is a purely quantitative exercise, even if the ultimate aim is qualitative use.<sup>33</sup>

Taking the opposite but complementary tack, and still in classical terms, Marx argues that this quantitative mode of evaluation is itself abstract, compared to the concrete specificities of use and consumption. And, crucially, this abstract way of looking at exchange poses a problem of equalization, much as Aristotle has posed the question: how is it that one product can exchange for another of equal value (in some sense)? Alternatively, there is the same argument the other way round: would exchanges take place in an apparently *stable* (i.e. non-random and self-regulating) fashion if equality were not possible to discern (in some sense) as these multitudinous and infinitely various transactions proceed?

If the arguments above do not hold – which was in fact Aristotle's conclusion – this leaves open a disturbing possibility. Is the whole system of physical exchange of objects – mediated by a notion of monetary value – founded instead on either an equality based on a

completely unknowable substance as standard measure, or alternatively on endemic ‘cheating’ in relation to something that is knowable, but only to the few, and therefore disguised from the many? As already noted,<sup>34</sup> in modern economics these are generally non-problems and non-issues, given that market-exchanges as they register in terms of prices and deals are taken as a source of meaningful data, rather than as a problematic phenomenon such that ‘deep’ investigation is required in order to expose a ‘hidden’ truth.

Marx viewed the problem as one of accounting for a contradiction between the presumptive and – supposedly – necessary equality in exchanges mediated by money, and the counter-intuitive outcome, i.e. a surplus arising from exchanges that are strictly equal, taking the system as a whole and over time. The outcome, as he understood it, is that profit arises within the system such that the system as a whole produces more monetized value in total than the sum of the equal exchanges through which it operates. His ‘deep’ resolution of this ‘surface’ phenomenon was to look further into the production process, as the political economists had done, and to keep to their presumption – and Aristotle's initial hypothesis – that only human labour was available as a concept, *and* as a physical reality (in some sense), through which to construct an answer, because only human labour was present as a singular common factor in any exchange of products. This argument by deduction of course implies that most products, most of the time, emerge only through the production process that Marx envisaged, or – to put the matter another way – the general run of products on the market aren't simply found fully formed and then used as such, but are only usable after qualitative change involving some expenditure of human labour.

Marx's solution was indeed ingenious: he argued that labour, as a physical but distinctively *human* substance, had a *unique* property, namely that it produced more products as outputs than it required as inputs to be consumed in order for workers to subsist in order to continue generating outputs. These inputs/outputs are measureable – in some, albeit highly abstract only quasi-physical sense of ‘to measure’ – as expenditures of labour over time, which is thus a common standard contained within labour itself<sup>35</sup> and common to its products. However, rather than a simple – and simply

measurable – physical standard, Marx reasoned from the individual and observable instance of manufacture to the general and social level of commodity-markets. His standard was ‘socially necessary’ labour-time ‘under given conditions’, which would vary over time and between societies.<sup>36</sup>

For Marx, it followed that none of this surplus in value arising from an otherwise equal exchange of subsistence-products for labour-time (via money-wages) could originate in either machinery or any other technologies involved, or in the raw materials and non-human energy sources in the processes. The unique property that Marx ascribed to labour (viewed in relation to quantification – at least in principle – and thus abstractly) was defined in the classical terms constituent of natural philosophy, namely as a ‘potential’ or ‘power’ or ‘capacity’ [*potentia*] that can be actualized when expended. Human labour, Marx stated, simply had a power within itself to produce more output in terms of ‘materialized’ labour-time than was required for it to reinvigorate this power through inputs of bodily subsistence, however differently subsistence was construed, over time and between societies.

Marx's theorization enabled him to generate a powerful and persuasively unified – if one accepts the initial premises – systemic account of capitalism, quintessentially defined in terms of exploitation. His analysis was dynamic in presenting capitalist behaviour by individuals as an effect of the system as an entity, rather than as an effect of individual choice (moral or otherwise). Writing in his Preface to *Capital*, vol. 1, he addressed the reader: ‘... here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic interests. My standpoint ... can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.’<sup>37</sup> The dynamic through which the system necessarily operated was the drive for limitless profits and therefore accumulations of wealth among competing ‘capitals’ (i.e. depersonalized subject-positions within the system), but constrained by the fact (as argued by Marx) that the surplus-value through which profit arises can only come from human labour. ‘Capital’ is thus continually exploiting ‘labour-power’ in two ways: prolonging the working-day (or in Marx's terms, forcing an increase in absolute

surplus value), or driving down the cost – in terms of ‘objectified’ or ‘materialized’ labour – of the subsistence products required to reproduce the labour-force. This reduction could occur by improving labour-productivity through mechanization (or in Marx's terms, benefiting from an increase in relative surplus value).<sup>38</sup>

It was easy enough for Marx, in *Capital*, vol. 1, to cite and quote empirical studies and parliamentary reports detailing the working and living conditions of contemporary labourers such that his rather dry abstractions came politically to life for his readers. Perhaps rather less easy to see was the more abstract economic – and more subtly moralized point – about a system that was at the heart of his indictment of capitalism, and his rhetorical entrée to a democratizing resolution of the ‘social question’. A recent study sums this up succinctly:

Contrary to what earlier socialists thought, then, the exploitation of the labourer by the capitalist is neither an echo nor a renaissance of feudalism. Capitalist exploitation is a novelty. It is based in the impersonal domination of the market, not the personal domination of the local monopolist ... It contains an immanent drive toward overwork that is alien to other forms of exploitation.<sup>39</sup>

Thus Marx resolved – to his own satisfaction – the problem that political economy had generated, and he had done it on terms that the political economists themselves would have to recognize as valid. Or alternatively they would have to wiggle their way around their own presuppositions in order to dispute his impeccable reasoning. In Marx's view much of their middle-class, commercially minded political certainties and intellectual securities would necessarily collapse as a result. Or if the political economists rejected his reasoning, then they would have to find another basis on which to defend their advocacy of commercialism and its profit-making institutions, and to account for its grim labouring conditions as documented by writers on the ‘social question’, and so be in an even tighter spot with respect to their hypocrisies.

And of course for Marx the way he had located a unique property within human labour itself, as it is expended by human labourers, brought his communist politics – in which the working-class or



proletariat was to be the heart of the revolution, as he had announced in 1844<sup>40</sup> – into definitional contact with his intellectual critique and his activist pamphleteering of the following decades. While these highly abstract arguments were generally lacking in his journalism, they are clearly consonant with his political commentary and political conclusions. What was lacking, on the whole, in Marx's life during the 1850s and early 1860s – and at least until the mid 1860s – was a coalitional and productive politics of practical activism and engaged critique directed towards national agitation for democratic revolutions or reforms, and highlighting the ‘social question’. During the 1840s Marx had been working within, and making interventions into, the democratic revolutionary radicalism that did – of its own accord – sweep through the German, Austro-Hungarian and various other states and empires in 1848, and that also generated the substantial repressions and political trials – including his own trial *in absentia*<sup>41</sup> – of the post-revolutionary 1850s.

## Politicizing Economics

While Marx's abstract reasoning in his so-called mature critique of the later 1860s and throughout the 1870s may seem somewhat recondite for effective use in knock-about politics, the single term that best expresses the link that he – and ultimately the ‘Marx party’ in Germany – was able to use in practical activism was already well known in common parlance: exploitation [*Ausbeutung*]. While prior critique related to the ‘social question’ had generally been limited to allegations of low wages or unfair bargains, and while this could have more or less purchase with any given audience, depending on class composition and personal positioning, the rhetoric was rather limited to amelioration and adjustment – more wages for workers, less resistance by employers, etc. This principle was widely current and commonly held as a truth, or at least some kind of ideal-to-be-realized. Market transactions were presented abstractly and justified politically, reasoning from this basis, as we have seen above with the political economists of the time. And from socialists and utopians – who were the unorthodox political economists of the time – there were any number of ‘labour-money’ chits or similar schemes for a



‘fair currency’ presented as an alternative to the existing monetized systems of market exchanges. Locally based ‘exchange’ vouchers or ‘money’, through which ‘swaps’ of commodities and labour-time are regulated, belong to this politico-economic genre.<sup>42</sup>

Marx's efforts to conceptualize the basic terms of market-exchanges in a capitalist system, which necessarily involves wage-workers, are most often reduced by commentators to presuming – and then defending, or alternatively attacking – the now unorthodox terms of his discussion, given that modern economics has since become an orthodoxy. Marx's politicized approach to capitalist economies, however, has become increasingly influential as a hybrid Marxist economics, though it has been hard work making it academically respectable. Scientific objectivity in conventional ‘marginalist’ economics rules it out almost completely because it is overtly political and politicizing, as well as invested with problems and concepts regarded as *passé*.<sup>43</sup>

Arguing that the class-divided character of current capitalist societies is a demonstrable and well-illustrated fact is one rhetorical tactic, as we have seen, that has been adopted by those who are engaged in a politics today of the ‘social question’. Arguing that exploitation is definitional for the overall production of, and distribution of, resources and power within the national and international political management of national economies and the global economic system is quite another tactic, and one where Marx's logically rigorous abstractions do not easily connect with on-the-ground and on-the-issue class struggles. Current political critique along these lines often argues from disparities of power – as in the *Manifesto* – rather than from the principles of natural philosophy that Marx used regarding labour, objects, value and products – as in the ‘theoretical’ sections of *Capital*. The notion that the ‘private’ accumulation of monetary resources, obviously obtained through social means, needs specific and renewed justification, and that these accumulations have distinct anti-democratic effects on public policy in and through the institutions of representative government, has considerable descriptive power and political purchase at present. Marx, in whatever guise, has been an important part of this process.

Since Marx's time the boldest links to his work have come through international 'dependency theory', which allocates class-positions to countries, rather than just to individuals, depending on their location within production and trading systems that are managed, so it is claimed, to the advantage of some great powers and to the obvious disadvantage of others as 'developing' or 'third-world' countries. Or to put it another way, there is little in the way of 'international welfare' for poor countries as there sometimes is for poor individuals. And much of what passes for 'welfare' for 'poor' and 'developing' countries (such as governmental, non-governmental organization (NGO) and charity 'aid') has already been critiqued as complicit with the processes of increasing and maintaining power-differentials to the disadvantage of the poor, in the first place.<sup>44</sup>

The situation in some 'developed' or 'rich' national economies where there are still some aspects of social democracy, welfare-state programmes, 'safety-nets' and the like – of which all are currently on the decline in most 'global north' societies – is less clear cut. Are citizens best envisaged as consumers, engaged in market-exchanges that represent their self-calculated utility functions? Or is it better to envisage them as workers – at least at some points in the life-cycle – who seem to have little choice other than to take wage-bargains that offer sharply declining real wages and 'benefits', such as pensions and health-care?

Perhaps the strongest line of Marxian argument relying on a concept of exploitation, a term that could be defined in terms of persistently unequal access to power and resources, is one that is linked to workable concepts of social democracy, not unlike the coalitional politics Marx outlined in revolutionary terms in the 1840s and prefigured in the *Manifesto* as a list of 'demands'.<sup>45</sup> However, as with Marx's despair in relation to the post-1848 elections and the plebiscites of 1851 and 1852 in France, voters sometimes throw their support to authoritarian politicians, often self-serving and borderline corrupt, or worse.

## **Alienation**

Ironically the precursor concept to exploitation as developed by Marx – alienation – is probably the one that circulates most widely today, though perhaps less often with Marxists than with people curious about Marx and concerned about the ‘social question’. The concept was not orthodox – or even known – to Marxism as it developed from the turn of the twentieth century, and it did not effectively circulate in a political discourse even loosely associated with Marx until the later 1950s, when the ‘1844’ or ‘Paris’ or ‘early’ manuscripts became popular in French and English translations. Marx's early – and editorially fabricated – ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844’<sup>46</sup> were only published in an edited-up form in German in 1932 (in two versions), and after that this ‘work’ slowly entered academic and eventually popular discourse as a ‘humanist’ Marx.<sup>47</sup>

Humanist was not merely a descriptor for the ‘human-centred’ philosophizing that readers saw in the manuscript selections. This text was in fact excerpted from loose sheets and notebooks on which, and in which, Marx was keeping extracts and notes-to-self related to the classics of political economy. Rather ‘humanist’ marked out a distinction opposed to the ‘materialist’ Marx constructed by Engels in the later 1870s and widely viewed as the author of a uniquely systematic connection between history, social science and the physical sciences. Engels had portrayed Marx in that way in a widely circulated eulogy, the ‘Graveside Speech’, and in his independent works and later introductions to Marx's. He was assiduous in promoting Marx as the social scientist of equivalent stature to Charles Darwin (1809–82), the great natural scientist and near-contemporary.<sup>48</sup>

However, the term ‘humanist’ also avoided the much more controversial anti-materialist move of denominating Marx an ‘idealist’ in the philosophical sense, since that would have positioned the new interest in Marx in the 1960s as obviously and egregiously heterodox, given the ‘materialism’ assigned to him, as Engels understood this. ‘Humanist’ suited the academic commentators and activist communities involved in working through this ‘unknown’ Marx. Interest really took off, however, during the 1960s with the headline-hitting youth and student unrest in the streets and

universities, mass demonstrations and frequent riots against the violent state-actions and repressions of the time. These were mass political movements against authoritarianism, elite hypocrisy, post-imperial wars and the like, working in loose and often unorganized coalitions of activists, provoking and facilitating considerable mass involvement.

The new Marx was also the young Marx, and the apparent genre of these '1844 manuscripts' – philosophical meditations on what seemed to be 'the basic facts' and 'enduring values' of human social life – was appealing, given Marx's well-known association with radical change up to and including incitement to revolution. The apparent difference in vocabulary and genre from more familiar works by Marx, which were the standard items in the orthodox Marxist canon and by then packaged into didactically prefaced cheap editions, was clearly advantageous. The abstraction of the discussion, and its largely contextless delivery, marked out the content as transferable across time and place, in short more philosophical than economic, given that the terms, presuppositions and reasoning methods did not look very much like those of modern economics. This Marx was young, rebellious, philosophical, humanist in a novel and secular mode, unclaimed and unwanted by orthodox Marxism, and in all those ways marketably fresh and relevant.<sup>49</sup>

Even more ironically these 'notes to self' written by Marx at a very early stage of his critical studies into political economy were not merely unpublished but also – until Marx had become an intellectual icon – unpublishable, not least because of their physical context as interleaved discussions among textual extracts. And indeed these remarks were sometimes written as direct commentary on copied-out passages that current editions of these 'manuscripts' do not reproduce in full. Moreover, Marx's meditations were also specifically disavowed by himself – or at least the concept of alienation certainly was – within a few months of writing them down in these particular notebooks. His researches into political economy had moved on a stage, specifically into classics that he read in English (and in Manchester), as had the concepts that were used by him in tackling the 'social question' in theoretical and political terms. But in the early 1840s those terms were largely set by his confrères, who were Young Hegelian philosopher-radicals, and probably some

German democratizing reformers who followed these semi-clandestine activist currents.

By the mid 1840s Marx's ambitions had moved up yet another stage in terms of his political interlocutors, advancing from German radicals and reformers, who were little known at the time, and in most cases even less remarked since then, other than in connection with Marx as a major historical figure. By 1846, and having lived outside the German states for three years, he was sneering – in further messy, disorganized manuscripts – that he was using the term ‘alienation’ there only to make some apparent sense to German philosophers. This mention was ironic because it was in clearly disavowed language that he was obviously demanding that they should also disavow.<sup>50</sup> And about these philosophers – and about philosophy in general – he was even more vulgarly dismissive. Having rid himself of would-be German radicals whose philosophy masqueraded – according to Marx – as political activism, he moved on to attack a very well-known French one: Proudhon.<sup>51</sup> The point of Marx's attack was to demonstrate his own superior grasp of the theoretical concepts of political economy, his thoroughly historicized approach to the possibilities of social change, and his well focused radicalism rooted – so he claimed – in the resolution of the ‘social question’. This resolution would be an industrial society organized classlessly through an equal liability to labour in social production.

At this point the ‘1960s’ appeal of Marx's ‘early writings’ on alienation comes into view. In that world it was far less easy to demarcate commercialized societies into exploiters and exploited, and to theorize quite so sharply about factory work and worsening crises, as Engels had done (and with some originality) about 120 years earlier.<sup>52</sup> Most readers, particularly in American and western European settings, were middle-class; governments in those regions were committed to managing national economies and welfare systems – to a certain degree, anyway; and in a smug end-of-ideology context the prospect of reviving Marx, at least as a ‘middle-finger’ gesture, was politically potent. Marx's somewhat timeless discussion – as it appeared, anyway, having been abstracted from the rather jumbled notebook context – allowed past, present and future to merge, and also facilitated an apparently seamless and ‘radical’

elision of philosophy and politics, which some contrarily positioned positivist philosophies of the time saw as necessarily opposite. Constructed that way, and read that way, 'Marx's theory of alienation' outlined a 'philosophy of man [sic]' that diagnosed the ills of capitalist industrial societies in quite abstract yet appealing terms. And it presented an alternative vision – equally abstract – as to how the current malaise could be overcome.

The theoretical materials in the '1844 manuscripts', though somewhat fragmentary and disorganized, were easily parsed into a quadripartite schema. The philosophical language of 'man' was current in the 1960s, although questioned even then on feminist grounds, so the rendition of the 'theory of alienation' offered here should be taken as faithful not only to the commentaries of the time, and to the original in English translation, but also to the problems that a philosophy of 'man' raises now in relation to feminist critiques:<sup>53</sup>

- Man is alienated from the product of his labour.
- Man is alienated from the social processes of production.
- Man is alienated from other men necessarily involved in these social processes.
- Man is alienated from his species-being, i.e. from that which demarcates humanity from other animals.<sup>54</sup>

Most commentators have taken Marx's usage of 'alienation' [*Entfremdung*] and 'estrangement' [*Entäusserung*] to mean much the same thing: 'hostility, detriment, or non-acceptance', and a general feeling of loss, disconnectedness and otherness, loosely derived from Hegelian conceptions that were current at the time. Fresh from his journalistic engagements with the 'social question', Marx ruminated for a short period on what poverty in commercial societies might signify at a more abstract level. Thus his notes were not psychological or sociological claims about what actual individuals might (or might not) be feeling about their circumstances but rather a descriptive and critical account of an economic system, albeit at a very high level of philosophical abstraction. Under the then-developing conditions of wage-labour, 'man' (i.e. a generic



wage-worker) was losing what had been the case in former craft manufacture and guild systems: an intimate, close and direct relationship with products and processes. Under a system of commodity-production for market exchanges, and therefore of wage-work obtainable only through these means, what had once been direct hands-on and personal relationships became impersonal ones, erasing the 'human touch'. While this might sound like an invitation to regress historically from modern manufactured goods and steam-powered factory production and go back to the middle ages in substance and manners, it is certain that Marx's analysis – and his lifelong view of historical progress – was not pushing in that backward and romantic direction.

Instead some form of Hegelian developmental transcendence ('sublation' or *Aufhebung* – a term popularized in alienation-studies) was on Marx's horizon, not least because the tenor of his ruminations was one of intensifying world-historical contradiction, rather than merely empirical poverty and immiseration. Capping it all was an intriguing distinction between this experiential misery of the modern age and the human potential for further but quite different and contrary paths of development. 'Man' was said to be alienated from 'his' species-being (*Gattungswesen*, another popular philosophical term in Marx's time), a conception that was contrasted with a liberation or emancipation of human creativity as limitless. This flattering account of human capacities, contrasted with mere satisfaction of needs (whether in relation to animal-species, or in contrast to reductively economistic visions of 'man'), hinted at a 'humanist' morality and anti-capitalist politics.<sup>55</sup> Politically this 'Marxism lite' enabled many 'left-leaning' activists – whether consciously or naively – to adopt a 'humanist' Marx resident in texts that were recently published but generally disavowed by previous Marxisms. This 'new Marx' thus sidelined the more dogmatic elements and leadership-styles of the various Marxisms to date, notably those derived from the Russian and Chinese revolutions, and their associated political practices, which were controversially authoritarian and murderous.

Certainly this simple schema outlining 'alienation' bears some relationship – at least implicitly – to labour and labourers as central to a critique of political economy, and to communism as a resolution

of the ‘social question’ through a money-less economy, or possibly to socialism as a way-station on this route. It sets up a space for a discussion of exploitation in pre-communist social systems, and it prefigures the much later ‘fetishism of commodities’ section of *Capital*, vol. 1, quite accurately: human social creations – that is commodities as useful products via the monetized market-relations between them – come to control the humans themselves, individually and collectively.<sup>56</sup> In Marx's later theory this fetishism – i.e. the ascription of human powers to inanimate objects – is specified through the metaphor of ‘social relations among things’, that is, a strangely alien or ‘other’ world in which commodities – as human creations – come to speak a ‘language’ (i.e. market pricing) among themselves in a ‘social’ relation (i.e. market forces) that dominates their creators (i.e. humans).<sup>57</sup>

Some commentators of the later 1960s and 1970s began to draw links between the theorizing of the ‘early’ Marx, the development of his theorizations in the ‘middle period’ *Grundrisse* writings (also editorially abstracted from various notebooks and assembled as a ‘work’),<sup>58</sup> and the ‘fetishism of commodities’ passages of the 1870s, which were Marx's own revisions to *Capital*, vol. 1. But most commentators worked to elucidate the exact schema, and the precise tenets of what Marx was saying, in order to reconstruct – or alternatively to construct afresh – a coherence in this ‘philosophy of man’.<sup>59</sup> As notes-to-self, Marx's ‘1844 manuscripts’ were not scrupulously consistent or complete, nor were the terms that so intrigued his mid twentieth-century commentators precisely defined by him, given the speed at which his reflections and ruminations were moving. His critical and highly political thinking simply flew along across various pages of source material, and – as thoughts struck him – he got them down onto paper as textual extracts and rough commentary.

Alienation or estrangement [*Entfremdung*], alien [*fremd*] objects, and externalization [*Entässerung*] were all much discussed in mid twentieth-century commentary in order to find the defining distinctions among these terms, if indeed there were any consistent ones. Rather similarly, species-being [*Gattungswesen*] was interpreted as a social relationship among labouring beings, which

fitted easily with Marx's later comments in *Capital*, vol. 1, on the 'worst of architects' and 'the best of bees'.<sup>60</sup> Most commentators, however, were happy enough not to involve themselves in the more recondite, controversial and well-trodden tracks that others – generally self-styled and party-identified Marxists – had already made through Marx's *magnum opus*. This non-engagement resulted from the attractions of a 'philosophical' language that apparently made the 'early writings' more accessible to philosophers and historians, given that most were unacquainted with the political economy of Marx's time in any detail. The incomplete character of the theories of 1844 was perforce an incentive for the philosophically minded to fill them in theoretically and – occasionally – empirically.

The latter activist approach typically referenced workers' cooperative movements, especially in the former Yugoslavian federation. Indeed the 'early writings' circulated in these contexts, where their unorthodoxy and unfamiliarity were again politically attractive, hence constitutive of the 'praxis' movement of the time, which made activist links with workers and working-class families. Coinciding with early anti-Soviet movements in eastern Europe these ideas – and importantly politicizing activities – had an influence on the development of decentralization and workers' control in factories. These political developments ran counter to Soviet orthodoxies of central planning, and suited the national-communist agenda of the Tito regime.<sup>61</sup>

In a quite different context, 'liberation theology' as a philosophy and a social movement in Latin America was inspired to a significant extent by Marx's 'theory of alienation', even though the atheistic and anti-religious character of Marx's politics was well known to the Roman Catholics who were most closely associated with many of the activist groups and locally based 'experiments in living'. Once again the 'middle-finger' appeal of the 'new Marx' was in evidence: rebellion within the Catholic Church, in order to reform and renew it in fundamental ways, was signalled by aligning it with Marx's anti-authoritarian radicalism, his 'workerist' critique of capitalist society, and his evident sympathies for 'man' – meaning humanity as a whole, emblematically viewed as socially associated workers. The atheistic and anti-religious Marx could be safely projected on to orthodox Marxists, whereas the 'humanist' Marx could be taken in

more acceptably secular and ostensibly tolerant terms, given the somewhat contextless but usefully abstract character of the 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts'. These movements were socially inclusive of poor workers and farm labourers, and in that way oppositional to landed and capitalist elites, who were perceived as ruling through hypocritical democratic and/or authoritarian means, uncritically supported by (most) Church hierarchies. Marx's philosophizing of 'man' as 'worker' became a frame through which gospel Christianity could be reinterpreted, given the brevity of Marx's comments and their relatively recent origin in an industrializing society.<sup>62</sup>

Alienation is now a firm part of Marx's global reception, and it represents a popular and accessible, sometimes even populist or workerist 'way in' to Marx. Texts and ideas that are more representative of Marx's precise theoretical interventions as an activist into the politics of his day take rather more interpretive effort, since they are more specifically contextual, like the *Manifesto*, or alternatively abstract in more recondite ways, like *Capital*, vol. 1. The tension here between Marx's anti-philosophical interventionism, Marxist textual and conceptual orthodoxies, and the politics of youthful – and now not-so-youthful – rebelliousness and protest will ensure the continued re-publication of this much re-published editorial fabrication, the 'manuscripts' of 1844.

In the later twentieth century, educational contexts became much more available in university settings throughout capitalist societies, and the class structure in them has generally, though not always and everywhere, stretched itself out in gradations along a scale, now extending upward to the unimaginable realm of 'high net worth individuals'. Indeed many more societies have – through processes of globalization – been absorbed into, or self-consciously opted into, capitalist relations of production, distribution, consumption and finance. And labouring itself has become increasingly service-oriented in these locales as economies move up the scale of per capita GDP, while actual factory-work has been relegated to marginalized sites within countries and to countries where media fact-finding does not easily penetrate. In this world an abstractly philosophical vision of *homo faber* ('man' as 'labourer') represents a space through which to air anxieties about the 'social question' and

to resolve this, if not in principle, then at least in terms of humanizing sympathies. Marx's 'theory of alienation' is thus made to point to theorizations of better relationships between individuals whose social activity of labouring together could be peacefully cooperative and mutually fulfilling.<sup>63</sup>

## **'Man' and 'Human Nature'**

Given the abstract character of Marx's philosophizing of 'man' as 'labourer' his ruminations unsurprisingly provoked a philosophical controversy – in the Anglophone world, anyway – as to whether he did or did not have a theory or concept of 'human nature', either explicitly or implicitly. This puzzle arose in virtue of Marx's and Engels's 'outlook' that advocated the historicization of human societies, relationships, ideas and moralities – indeed legal, religious and cultural phenomena – 'all the way down'.<sup>64</sup> Was Marx's philosophy of 'man' so abstract and therefore historyless in character that it contradicted these later remarks, which, in the *Manifesto*, are quite categorically historicizing? Or by contrast were these abstractions still somehow consistent with Marx's 'theory of history', as understood from the *Manifesto* and certain other sources in his writings, notwithstanding the claim that moral systems are always relative to the productive technologies and social relations of the time? These battle lines were largely academic, yet also political within various strains of academic approaches to Marx. Some of these were in tune with, and defensive of, Marxist orthodoxies of various sorts, and some were rebellious against just those orthodoxies, or alternatively rather uninterested in engaging them on exactly their own terms.

The problem itself – did Marx have a theory or concept of human nature, or not? – had rather little direct impact on activism of the time, other than figuring in already existent debates that perhaps resounded rather distantly with those who were concerning themselves with class and struggle. The conclusion – as the debate petered out – was that Marx in those early writings could be read as if generalizations concerning human nature make some very general sense in relation to labour, taken very broadly and therefore very abstractly. However, Marx's more striking views of this period – that



humans remake themselves, even in terms of physicality and sensory perceptions, as their societies alter productive systems and relationships – became a rather more interesting and eventually more dominant idea. The upshot was that attempts to fix Marx with a concept of human nature, from which history would unfold in predictable terms, projected too much essentialism – whether Aristotelian materialist or Hegelian idealist – into manuscript notes that were themselves very sketchy. Nonetheless the episode shows the remarkable tenacity with which commentators and activists were determined to get to grips with an unknown Marx, a youthful Marx, and a new Marx, thus giving him quite a new lease of life.<sup>65</sup>

While the *Manifesto* is notable for saying nothing about alienation, materialism, idealism, dialectic, Hegel, philosophy or even ideology as a specific term, it is – as Marx and Engels said in 1872 – rather too much of its time and rather too difficult to update, without writing a completely new one, which is what they had suggested. *Capital*, vol. 1, presents the nearly insuperable problems of translation between the world of political economy and our world of modern economics, described above, even though many of its concepts are still – as was intended in the way Marx structured his critique – very much of the ‘everyday’ in current capitalist societies, namely commodity, value, money, capital, labour and the like. It therefore might seem odd that a superseded and unpublishable ‘work’, containing an ill-defined set of terms such as ‘alienation’ and ‘species-being’, a number of suggestive but unrevised meditations on *homo faber* (‘man’ as ‘maker’), and apparently bereft of an obvious contemporary interlocutor and specific political location, should have garnered such a wide audience, international appeal and even pop-culture status as did the ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’. However, these circumstances show the transferability of abstraction, its use in developing political movements and possibilities and the power of sheer curiosity in forging an unlikely link.

## Back to the Future

Or at least these links were forged with the activism of some generations ago. Occupy was less concerned with such abstractions



as alienation – much less human nature – and more concerned with specifics of social class, life-cycle prospects, the distribution of property and wealth, and the capture (as was claimed) of democratic institutions by corporate interests. The successor theory to alienation in Marx's work – the fetishism of commodities – appeared somewhat more readily, though often in a simple version rather untrue to the text. The inaccurate version was simply the claim that people pay too much attention to the acquisition of commodities, particularly as a circulation of 'signs' or status symbols, and not enough to reforming or revolutionizing the provision of resources more equitably throughout commodity-producing societies.

The anti-globalization social movements and media-grabbing anti-capitalist protests have effectively taken the argument to international governmental and multi-national corporate power structures, where a rather general concept of exploitation has been more useful than in 'developed' contexts, where workers are not – at least as yet – so obviously penurious and starving as Engels had described and as he and Marx had predicted would come increasingly to pass. These globally significant activist movements have made the huge discrepancies in power between international corporate interests, and their backers in national governments, highly visible over and against the harsh realities of life in 'less developed' countries reliant on low-value primary products, particularly agricultural ones, or similarly reliant on low-value assembly-line production, notably of very high-tech, high-value items.

But ironically a central Marxian element has in general dropped out: this was Marx's argument that theorizations should start from production, i.e. productive processes and relationships, rather than from consumption and exchange, as is theorized by modern economics. Marx dramatizes his point unforgettably in a powerful resonance with on-going conflicts today over how to address the 'social question', writing up the 'free market' sardonically as an imaginary idyll:

This sphere [of market exchanges] ... is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property ... Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own ... The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each [to] ... work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and the interest of all.<sup>66</sup>

But things change abruptly when entering the sphere of production, i.e. jobs, wages, employment, 'benefits' and the like:

On leaving this sphere of simple circulation or of exchange of commodities, which furnishes the 'Free-trader' ... with his views and ideas, and with the standard by which he judges a society based on capital and wages, we think we can perceive a change in the physiognomy of our *dramatis personae*. He, who before was the money owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking ... the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but – a hiding.<sup>67</sup>

As in Marx's time this is the nexus between property and power where theory and practice, the theoretical and the practical, the reformist and the revolutionary, the hard-headed and the utopian – converge. With respect to the 'social question', he was and is 'one of us', and doubtless has yet more to offer.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>. See [Chapter 4](#) 'Democracy and Communism/Socialism', and [Chapter 5](#) 'Capitalism and Revolution'.

- [2.](#) See the discussion in Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, pp. 142–4.
- [3.](#) For overview and further reading see Marshall Cohen (ed.), *Marx, Justice and History: A 'Philosophy and Public Affairs' Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Rodney G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); see [Chapter 2](#) 'Class Struggle and Class Compromise'.
- [4.](#) Note that the 'both' option negates the well-worn but increasingly disputed view that facts can be neatly and analytically separated from values, or objective from normative statements.
- [5.](#) See [Chapter 1](#) 'Making Marx "Marx" '.
- [6.](#) See [Chapter 2](#) 'Class Struggle and Class Compromise'.
- [7.](#) See [Chapter 3](#) 'History and Progress'.
- [8.](#) See, for example, part III of the *Manifesto*; *LPW* 20–9; *CW* 6: 507–17; and see [Chapter 2](#) 'Class Struggle and Class Compromise'.
- [9.](#) See [Chapter 3](#) 'History and Progress'.
- [10.](#) See the *Manifesto*, part IV, for the 'bare bones' outline of this process; *LPW* 29–30; *CW* 6: 518–19.
- [11.](#) *EPW* 64; translation slightly altered; *CW* 182.
- [12.](#) See [Chapter 1](#) 'Making Marx "Marx" '.
- [13.](#) As we saw in [Chapter 4](#) 'Democracy and Communism/Socialism'.
- [14.](#) *CW* 20: 101–49, 466 n. 87.
- [15.](#) See [Chapter 4](#) 'Democracy and Communism/Socialism'.
- [16.](#) As we have seen in [Chapter 5](#) 'Capitalism and Revolution'.
- [17.](#) 'The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process generally'; Marx, 'Preface', *LPW* 160; *CW* 29: 263.
- [18.](#) As we saw in [Chapter 2](#) 'Class Struggle and Class Compromise'.

19. For a discussion, see Carver, *Texts on Method*, pp. 89–97.
20. See [Chapter 5](#) ‘Capitalism and Revolution’.
21. See [Chapter 2](#) ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’.
22. The reader is also perhaps encouraged to imagine the ‘one-man’ economy of Robinson Crusoe, i.e. that the implements through which beavers and fish are caught and transported are also manufactured by each of the two exchangers themselves.
23. *CW* 29: 264; *CW* 35: *passim*.
24. See [Chapter 5](#) ‘Capitalism and Revolution’.
25. 1133a25.
26. *CW* 6: 425–6.
27. *CW* 29: 257–417.
28. *LPW* 13–19; *CW* 6: 497–504.
29. See [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Communism/Socialism’.
30. See *LPW* 18–19; *CW* 6: 503–4; Engels later repurposed ‘ideology’ as a concept in relation to materialism, understood in relation to the physical and other natural sciences of the 1860s; for a discussion, see Carver, *Engels*, ch. 7; see [Chapter 3](#) ‘History and Progress’.
31. In [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx” ’.
32. The following exposition is derived from *Capital*, vol. 1; *CW* 35: 45–208, esp. 187–208; see also Carver, *Postmodern Marx*, chs 3–4.
33. Marx cites Benjamin Franklin's lines on the subject as typically inadequate and naïve: ‘ “Trade in general being nothing else but the exchange of labour for labour, the value of all things is ... most justly measured by labour” ’; *CW* 35. 61.
34. In [Chapter 5](#) ‘Capitalism and Revolution’.

35. And factored as regular multiples by skill; note that this move by Marx presumes the equalization of human labour in abstract terms as labour-power, a commodity-on-the-market, as opposed to the concrete bodily and emotional existence of human social beings; *CW* 35: 51–6.
36. See the discussion in David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (London: Verso, 2010).
37. *CW* 35: 10.
38. *CW* 35: 187–534.
39. Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, pp. 132–3.
40. *EPW* 70; *CW* 3: 187 .
41. Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, pp. 302–3.
42. See, for example, the ‘Bristol pound’; <http://bristolpound.org/>
43. Such as the famous ‘transformation problem’ of values into prices across the capitalist economic system.
44. For a discussion, see Dimitris Stevis and Terry Boswell, *Globalization and Labor: Democratizing Global Governance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).
45. *LPW* 19–20; *CW* 6: 505.
46. ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844’; *CW* 3: 229–346.
47. For a discussion of the process through which these ‘manuscripts’ emerged, see Rojahn, ‘Emergence of a Theory’.
48. *CW* 463–81; for a discussion, see Carver, *Engels*, chs 6–7.
49. For a discussion, see Carver, ‘McLellan's Marx’.
50. *CW* 5: 48.
51. As we saw in [Chapter 1](#) ‘Making Marx “Marx” ’, and in [Chapter 4](#) ‘Democracy and Communism/Socialism’; *CW* 6: 105–212.

- [52.](#) In *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845); CW 4: 295–583.
- [53.](#) For discussion, see Carver, *Postmodern Marx*, ch. 10.
- [54.](#) CW 3: 270–82; see the very full explication of ‘alienation’ and further interpretation of Marx (which starts from this perspective) in Allen W. Wood, *Karl Marx*, 2nd edn (Milton Park: Routledge, 2012 [1981]).
- [55.](#) These concepts are covered in more detail in Holt, *Social Thought of Karl Marx*, pp. 67–80.
- [56.](#) As we saw in [Chapter 5](#) ‘Capitalism and Revolution’; for a discussion see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 158–66.
- [57.](#) CW 35: 81–93; see the detailed discussion in Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, pp. 82–93.
- [58.](#) For extensive discussion see Musto, *Karl Marx's Grundrisse*, pp. 3–32, 149–61.
- [59.](#) For discussions see David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (London: Macmillan, 1969) and *Marx Before Marxism* (London: Macmillan, 1970); also Leopold, *Young Karl Marx*, ch. 4.
- [60.](#) CW 35: 187–8.
- [61.](#) For current, updated discussion along these lines, see Richard Wolff, *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012).
- [62.](#) For extensive discussion, see Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- [63.](#) See the brief discussion in Jonathan Wolff, *Why Read Marx Today?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 28–37.
- [64.](#) As explained in [Chapter 3](#) ‘History and Progress’, and above.



[65.](#) For a classic of this genre see Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso, 2016 [1983]).

[66.](#) *CW* 35: 186.

[67.](#) *CW* 35: 186.

## Afterword

So where does that leave us in relation to Marx, and him in relation to us? There are any number of ways that this relationship can be constructed, as this book has demonstrated, and – given the secure international reputation, and the vast amount of material available – there is no reason to think that this process is over, or even declining, rather the reverse. But then this situation poses the question, why?

This book has taken a political angle on the subject, namely an argued coincidence of concepts and issues between our time and Marx's. The link is the 'social question', conceived not merely as inequality between individuals (and as generated by individual actions) but rather more intractably as 'social class' (a persisting structure through which individuals are very often constrained by 'their place'). Individuals may like this (or not), accept it (or not), but if 'not' in these instances, then they may resist and may alter their individual circumstances, or – as Marx fervently hoped – rebel collectively against the structures of power through which circumstances and life-chances for individuals arise.

Marx's politics resisted the idea that the future must necessarily be the same as the presumed certainties of the present, and his conception of class was performative – it was something that had to be made, not just identified. And it was analytical – it arose in and through specific properties of commodified production for exchange, including the reproduction of human labour 'inputs'. This seems to me to track any number of political movements, positions and arguments of the present, and to give us a 'take' on any number of debating points, confrontations, even revolutionary acts and armed uprisings as they break out. But certainly this political orientation towards class does not describe all conflicts everywhere, since the point in Marx's activism was to *make* conflicts that 'looked like that'. Nor is this political orientation a simple prescription for any and every conflict. Looked at that way, maybe Marx's legacy can be an inspiration, rather than an exegetical burden. And looked at that way, class struggle, class analysis and class theory set a stage for seeing what Marx has to say about history, progress, democracy,

socialism/communism, capitalism, revolution, exploitation and alienation – which is how this book was structured.

Alternatively there is no law against reading Marx as a philosopher, a sociologist, a political scientist or an economist, where an only slightly varied canon of ‘basic’ writings sits easily in ‘readers’ for instructors and students. As with the political ‘take’ outlined above, but in a rather contrasting manner, this academic approach produces a number of ‘Marxes’ more or less fit for purpose, generating appropriately knotty puzzles and more or less inspiring scholarly enquiries. Explication in that way began in earnest just after Marx died, with formulations of his relationship to, and of course critique of, philosophical materialisms, idealisms, Hegelian dialectics, particular histories and the like, generally extrapolating from what he said *politically* about materialists, idealists, Hegelians, dialecticians and historical changes. Much the same applies to somewhat later constructions of his ‘theories’ of class, class politics, the state, revolution and communism, as well as to the intricacies of his work on value, surplus-value, labour-power, money, capital and markets, and by extension to more familiar economic concepts of price, rent, productivity and crisis. There is no doubt that he is good fun, as any number of authors can be when they’re sufficiently revived as teachers and colleagues (even if some hundreds of years old). And there is no doubt that his argumentative analyses and *ad hominem* critiques are intricately and eruditely argued in a memorable rhetorical manner.

This book has been quite selective in ‘bringing in’ some of the various ‘Marxes’ along the way, so as to give the reader a contemporary view of his legacy (his actual will and testament was quite a simple affair, though his literary executor, Engels, exploited the surviving materials in ways described above). Thus Leninists, Stalinists and Maoists do not figure in this introductory study, but the construction of a ‘materialist theory of history’ certainly does, since that has persisted as an intellectual and political artefact since the days of Engels and on into the present. Similarly other canonical concepts such as bourgeoisie and proletariat, revolutionary transformation, dictatorship of the proletariat, value and surplus-value, and communism (if sketchily) figure here as ‘basics’. The now ubiquitous ‘base and superstructure’ metaphor only occurs once as such in

Marx's writings, and then rather tentatively and in passing; it comes up here in discussions of historical change, where he situated this rather tempting image. And similarly in his political interventions Marx did not resort to 'dialectic' as a formula, and rather tetchily remarked that he had no 'master key' for historical development and political change, foreswearing any 'all-purpose formula of a general historico-philosophical theory whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical'.<sup>1</sup> Once again, this proved a tempting idea, developed at length by Engels, and it has been pursued by some distinguished (and some very undistinguished) philosophers.

However, it is certainly not the case that Marx's activism tracked all our current ones, and it follows that he might not have much to say to us in certain respects. But given his status as intellectual and political reference point, attempts are always underway to make him speak to these concerns, though the results are often 'a stretch' (or indeed that he is not obviously on the right side of currently 'progressive' issues, causes and movements). Marx was not actively engaged with 'the woman question', which generated overt struggle and controversy in socialist circles in the later 1870s, so rather predictably 'a Marx' has been constructed since then to speak to that question, and to gender-hierarchy in relation to class-hierarchy, as he conceived it. As described above, this sort of construction involves 'mining' the archive for snippets and quotations, as indeed women (though not men-as-men in a gendered account) figure from time to time in various contexts, though as an adjunct to matters at hand.<sup>2</sup>

The politics of nationalism, race/ethnicity and the post-colonial perspective have similarly undertaken to locate Marx's 'thought' in relation to on-going political concerns and projects, both practical and intellectual. The *Manifesto* is famously dismissive of nationalisms as potent and persisting political movements ('Workers have no nation of their own'), though section IV of the text deals with socialist parties in national settings, necessarily involved in coalitional politics.<sup>3</sup> Marx's journalism is in no way dismissive of nations and nationalist projects, since he engages explicitly with imperial conquest, nation-building and nationalist revolt in economic and political terms. He generally promoted an international perspective on class struggle and working-class

liberation, as one would expect – even if he (and indeed often we ourselves) are somewhat stuck for easy analysis and easy answers.<sup>4</sup> Though prone in correspondence to casual expressions that are today flagged as racist, his activism was most definitely on-side with anti-slavery movements (even if he was rather unforthcoming on other aspects of racial hierarchy within class-structured societies). Constructing ‘a Marx’ to speak to these issues, particularly the centrality (rather than marginality) of colonialism to capitalism and its ‘inner logic’, is not particularly easy – but then scholars today seldom find these issues very straightforward even in conceptual terms.<sup>5</sup>

But in many ways Marx was different, which is why this book has focused on him as an engaged activist. While not all ‘great men’ of Western, white academia were disengaged from their political environment or indeed from self-conscious interventions from time-to-time, Marx was unusually consistent as a political animal, even if not a politician, exactly. None of his contemporaries had quite his persistence, most faded into obscurity or even recanted their youthful radicalism, and some indeed rose within the ranks of respectable socialist party politics. However, events unfolded during the twentieth century that made Marx iconic, but formulaic: Lenin, Stalin and Mao produced primers, short courses, paraphrases and reductions to suit their political purposes. But unlike Marx, these men were politicians and became world leaders, but then from today's perspectives none of these former heroes (of various self-styled and contending Marxisms) figures very large in the ‘social theory’ world of academic study. In a sense, they succeeded at what Marx apparently did not try. By contrast Platonists or Aristotelians or Kantians or Hegelians or Ricardians or Weberians have not figured that way on the world stage, and their respective gurus did not acquire such highly politicized avatars as was Marx's fate.

In this book, then, a political ‘take’ on Marx – as an activist in the ‘everyday’ – does not produce a new version of any of the ‘Marxes’ to date, or a one-life-suits-all ‘Marxes’ to date, but then I am arguing that that is a strength, though not of your author – but rather of the subject.

## Notes

1. 'Letter to *Otechestvenniye Zapiski*', November 1877, *CW* 24: 201.
2. For discussions on this basis, see Carver, *Postmodern Marx*, ch. 10; and Joan Tronto, 'Hunting for Women, Haunted by Gender: The Rhetorical Limits of the Manifesto', in Carver and Farr (eds), *Cambridge Companion to The Communist Manifesto*, pp. 134–52.
3. *LPW* 17, 29–30; *CW* 6: 502, 518–19.
4. For discussion see Erica Benner, *Really Existing Nationalisms: A Post-Communist View from Marx and Engels* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, new edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
5. For a post-colonial engagement with Marx, see Robbie Shilliam, 'Decolonizing the Manifesto: Communism and the Slave Analogy', in Carver and Farr (eds), *Cambridge Companion to The Communist Manifesto*, pp. 195–213.



## A Note on Complete Works and Canon-Formation

Bibliography may seem a dry subject, and a process that merely collates the obvious, and canon-formation much the same – great works simply arrive that way, and lesser works fall into place. However, with Marx, anyway, this is far from the case, and the political histories are quite complex. The following ‘Note’ follows on from my discussion at the opening of this book that notified the reader that ‘Making Marx “Marx”’ is a process of construction involving bibliography and canon-formation, and gave some ‘basics’. Here is a somewhat more detailed account, though hardly a full one, but rather more of a guide to the background and current situation.

A collected works project for Marx was mooted by himself in the early 1850s, and after convoluted negotiations – given that he and his ilk were under suspicion in the run-up to the anti-communist witch-hunts and trials in Cologne of late 1852 – the first instalment of his *Gesammelte Aufsätze von Karl Marx*<sup>1</sup> was published there in April 1851, and is now quite rare. It contained two of his articles (one complete, one in part) dating from his liberal/radical journalism of 1842.<sup>2</sup> The contextual politics of the 1850s suggests that his political journalism of the revolutionary and immediate post-revolutionary period would have been the major and featured items, eventually, as the series progressed. This seems highly likely, given that at exactly this time Marx and Engels were also negotiating with a Swiss publisher to continue their Hamburg-based *Politisch-Ökonomische Revue*<sup>3</sup> of 1850. This periodical was the successor to their revolutionary *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, which had succumbed in the defeats of the revolutionary forces and regimes that took place in 1849.<sup>4</sup> In the six issues of their ‘Review’ the two authors/editors recounted the events and prospects of the on-going class struggles in France and elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

It seems highly unlikely that manuscript works, undertaken to clarify his own thinking, would feature in this publication process, even if

Marx had been motivated to finish them, or at least tidy them up. Perhaps there are circumstances under which he would have completed his draft *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*,<sup>6</sup> or extracted his thoughts on 'alienation'<sup>7</sup> himself from his 'excerpt notebooks' – which intermingled quotations from political economists with his first ruminations of critique – but this seems far-fetched.<sup>8</sup> Marx was busy enough in the 1850s with seriously innovative researches into writers and concepts that were more pertinent after the revolution than before – which is not at all to say that his early thoughts have nothing to do with his later ones. But on the whole he was little inclined to self-conscious 'mining' or recycling of messy thoughts in messy manuscripts. In fact over the years he was more inclined to make fresh starts than to rework previous drafts, and also often minded to change his detailed plans.

The manuscripts Marx left aside in the 1840s were generally directed – one way or another – at political opponents, and at a kind of highly censored and highly intellectualized politics that was no longer current from the 1850s onwards. Rather than a backward-looking and somewhat narcissistic exercise, the plan for volumes of *Collected Essays* looks rather more like it was intended to recirculate only those items that would raise issues – such as press freedom and representative government – that were still politically current and are currently still controversial. In relation to collecting his own works, Marx was – as ever – an activist/journalist in his public *persona*, and his self-defined canon was a reflection of that.

Marx's first biographer, Franz Mehring, catalogued the papers in the Marx archive, but did not live to consider an edition of collected works, including Marx's few published volumes similarly collected. After a false start in 1911–13,<sup>9</sup> that project was undertaken by D. B. Riazanov (1870–1938), who worked in conjunction with a Russian-German team of scholars and activists in the early 1920s.<sup>10</sup> Later in the decade Riazanov was imprisoned as a traitor to the Soviet regime and replaced by a Stalinist successor. The project, the *Marx–Engels–Gesamtausgabe*,<sup>11</sup> resulted in only eleven volumes and was discontinued at the onset of the Second World War.

Unlike the mooted collection of essays in the 1850s, Riazanov's Marx–Engels-Institute (and its partner enterprises in Germany)

proceeded on an academically derived and scientifically oriented set of principles. The model they generated was intended to be an exemplar of historical accuracy, rigorous textual method and scrupulous objectivity, ring-fenced within an overall political and politicizing intent, the small print-runs and formidable scholarly apparatus notwithstanding.<sup>12</sup> While the later, revived *Marx–Engels–Gesamtausgabe* project of the 1970s (known as MEGA<sup>2</sup>,<sup>13</sup> and still continuing) differs somewhat from Riazanov's plan and methodology, the overall outlines are quite self-consciously similar. It is to some of these similarities that I wish to turn here and to comment on critically in terms of downsides to such monuments of editorial scholarship that are constructed in tribute to a 'great man', but conversely conferring and confirming that particular kind of construction.

Riazanov's plan involved not merely a chronology and authorization of the Marx–Engels works but a separation and hierarchy: Series 1 [*Band*] would be works (as classified by the editors, and excepting *Capital*, which would be covered in popular editions); Series 2 would be 'economic' manuscripts (again, as determined by editors); and Series 3 would be letters written by the two.<sup>14</sup> MEGA<sup>2</sup> is similarly set up (and since the 1970s, rigidly adhered to): Series 1 comprises works (as determined by the editors), excepting *Capital*; Series 2 is 'economic' manuscripts and publications, beginning in 1857–8 and including *Capital*; Series 3 is correspondence, including third-party letters; and Series 4 is notebooks, including note-taking excerpts and any items of miscellany.<sup>15</sup>

While published books and articles are easy enough to spot, unpublished drafts of works that were merely planned (in various ways) clearly raise difficulties. Indeed Riazanov inaugurated his project with a 'discovery' of a 'chapter' to a 'planned' work by 'Marx and Engels' (only) to be edited into a single 'volume' with a definitive title – namely the 'Feuerbach chapter' of the so-called *German Ideology*.<sup>16</sup> However, the more obvious – but little remarked – issue that glares at us is the classification of some works, published or otherwise, as 'economic' (rather than 'philosophical'? or simply – as is my approach here – 'political'?). Probably this reflects a division of expertise and labour that seemed obvious at the time,<sup>17</sup> and still

does, within the MEGA<sup>2</sup> project, where *Capital*-oriented scholars are generally divided off from other experts.

Perhaps the extraction of texts from manuscript notebooks, arranged for publication as another ‘work’ in 1932, shows this vividly in the editorial titling. Although stated as a combination, there are two separate categories here: ‘*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*’.<sup>18</sup> This is clearly a fabrication put together from Marx's ‘notes to self’<sup>19</sup> that would require scholarly explication in terms that the author did not himself use and would have excoriated: his political battles of the time were with philosophers, precisely because they *were* philosophers. He was even then tackling political economy – not to be confused with modern ‘economics’<sup>20</sup> – as a politically motivated critic.

But what kind of violence does this process of editorial selectivity and tendentious framing do to Marx's ‘thought’? And indeed what happens to his self-defined *persona* when a ‘thought’ is assigned to him – and, perforce resident in all his works – particularly when the recovery of this ‘thought’ dominates what his writings, taken as ‘a whole’, are thought to mean? Riazanov put his view with particular clarity in 1914:

... [a] scientific biography of Marx and Engels ranks as one of the most important and enticing tasks of modern historiography ... It depicts the development of their worldview in all their [*sic*] phases, which has in the same time become the prevailing theory of international social democracy.<sup>21</sup>

Historical and political contextualization can of course be fitted into this and inserted around the various items, but this does involve a downgrading (or even displacement) of political intent, everyday activity and even the intellectual context of the time. We read what Marx and/or Engels said about those with whom they disagreed, whether about ideas or strategies, but very seldom do we read the works of those whom the two were attacking. But even beginning with Marx's autobiographical comments in 1859, and Engels's reflections in the 1880s, the polemics of the 1840s were long before dismissed as tedious, and modern readers, even those with the requisite language-skills and research-library access, have little

incentive to take some of these ‘minor’ figures at all seriously, even to grasp what Marx was exercised about, and why he proceeded as he did.<sup>22</sup> Indeed what mattered to him becomes very largely obscured, rather deliberately by those who have already decided to read him as a philosopher or sociologist or economist. This is rather more than victors’ history, which does violence to the defeated. A history of the victors themselves does them violence if we are not presented with a plausible version of what made their struggles meaningful – and of such importance – to them.

Perhaps paradoxically, having separated out various writings into various genres (with attendant hierarchies), the production of collected works self-consciously aims to achieve uniformity of presentation, and thus to offer considerable convenience to readers who want easy access to text. A recourse to facsimile collections might seem quite crazy in terms of book production, but in terms of digital imaging we may see more of this. A paper facsimile of the ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’ is an instructive item to look at or to hand round a classroom or lecture audience; it looks and feels different, and its crudity evokes a world of activism and struggle. But the poor typography and Gothic type of this ‘scrappy’ pamphlet – even for those who read German – present obstacles.

My point here is to query what happens when all works of any kind are not only denominated ‘works’ comprising a ‘thought’ but are then made to *all look the same* on the printed page. This makes it easy to read Marx as a ‘thinker’ delivering items of ‘thought’, often requiring separation from ‘inessential’ prose, particularly in the polemics (of which Marx was inordinately fond) and correspondence (which by definition is full of the everyday). Read in this way the ‘thinker’s’ ideas are to be treasured if consistent with what his ‘thought’ is already known to be, and then investigated if inconsistent, or apparently so. With indexing – at least per volume, as in the English-language *Collected Works* – it becomes quite easy to quote ‘Marx’ from here-there-and-anywhere, as if it is always the same person writing for the same audience in the same medium and in the same context, brief editorial contextualizations (in this case, buried deeply in endnotes) notwithstanding.



The argument can also be put round the other way, as I found when asked to look into Marx's thinking on economic crises, a request not uncommon in the post-2008 political climate. While many colleagues, specialists in the 'economic' manuscripts, went to those 'economic' volumes without question, and indeed exclusively so, my project – self-suggested – was to re-construct Marx's thinking (rather than his 'thought') during a real economic crisis, namely the Euro-American financial crash of 1857–8.<sup>23</sup> This entailed an attempt to coordinate, almost day-by-day, his analysis, writings and publications – including journalism and correspondence – during this short period. The object was to see what his ideas were and what he wanted to do with them, rather than to extract his 'theory', even at that supposedly early point, as if this were some singular and context-less conceptualization.

Whether or not this was a worthwhile approach, and whether or not it would actually succeed, are still open questions. My point here is that the tendentious division of Marx's writings into academically oriented genres has consequences: finding one's way in the English-language *Collected Works* or in the original-languages MEGA<sup>2</sup> is far from convenient if one approaches Marx as an activist/journalist, at work in the everyday, in order to draw his writings together with his lived experience. Tracking the dispersal of 'works' through various volumes, second-guessing what is or is not 'economic' as a manuscript in various recensions and coordinating all that with the correspondence – which lists third-party initiatives and responses separately from the relevant Marx–Engels letters – is very hard work indeed. Still, it would be harder if these items had not been collected, transcribed, introduced, footnoted and analysed with an *apparatus criticus* as per bibliographical science.

The most important place to track the developments that have made Marx 'Marx' is not in the biographical narratives *per se*, but rather in the bibliographical selections, listings and evaluations that the biographers produce or reproduce. In the case of a thinker of most any kind, or even painter or composer, the attribution of major or minor status to a work, or even manuscript, unfinished or rough-draft 'work', represents the narrative device through which a biography proceeds in an overall chronological way. Perhaps the clearest example of this scaffold-like interaction between chronology



and bibliography is V. Adoratskij's (1875–1945) remarkable but untranslated *Karl Marx: Chronik seines Lebens in Einzeldaten*,<sup>24</sup> and subsequent similar works that use the same system. While the diary-like structure would seem to recount the everyday, whatever that happened to be for a particular day as recorded in some way (usually in letters), the animating impulse is clearly the story of the great works, already known to the chronicler in a hierarchy, since the everyday would – so it is presumed – otherwise be of little interest. Such everyday details would not construct the subject's life as that of a ‘thinker’, though a sprinkling of these ‘human’ touches – even in a dry chronology – is increasingly *de rigueur*.<sup>25</sup>

As we have seen, the selection and hierarchy of works through which Marx told his readers about himself – at the few points when he did so – is startlingly different from the selection and hierarchy as it has been constructed – and significantly re-constructed several times – in the 130 or so years since his death.<sup>26</sup> The conclusion here is not that Marx himself was right about this and others wrong, or that any of the others is ‘more right’ than any other. Rather my conclusion is that the process of canon-formation has another dimension, which needs critical exploration.

Canon-formation is observable not just in re-published – or re-constructed and newly published – individual works, a strategy energetically pursued by Engels after Marx's death,<sup>27</sup> and proceeding apace ever since. Nor is canon-formation solidified in the various selections and collections of works – whether complete, completed or excerpted – that have been commonly produced and globally circulated since the 1930s. Rather in the 1920s canon-formation took an important turn and upped-the-stakes by going into a complete works or multi-volume major collections format. This is a distinctive process that continues, but appears over and above scrutiny as an arcane, scholarship-for-the-scholars archival activity.

There are now massive runs of massive volumes that bring Marx's *oeuvre*, as defined by bibliographers, to worldwide audiences in the original languages, not always German, and in various uniform translations. These collections incorporate editorial judgements and bibliographical hierarchies that contrast starkly with the everyday context through which Marx wrote what he wrote in order to do what

he was doing. Indeed even the physical attributes of producing such books – or even the current on-line reader-technologies reflecting this – militate against a merging of interpretive horizons between Marx's everyday political activism and contemporary readers' perceptions. In short with the production of collected works Marx – notwithstanding homage to him as 'man and fighter'<sup>28</sup> – has become another great writer or thinker, even philosopher, on the library shelves and educational reading lists. There he is on a par with, but perhaps unfortunately assimilated to, the likes of Aristotle (385–323 BCE) or Leibniz (1646–1716), Kant (1724–1804) or Hegel (1770–1831), or any number of other productions in the ultimate scholarly genre – the complete works, correspondence and papers of any kind, edited and reproduced on sound principles, beautifully printed, uniformly bound and 'helpfully' numbered – even if some of these cataloguing and numbering systems are the bane of librarians and readers.

There are gains and losses that result from the application of the principles of bibliographical science to Marx's works, and in that way presenting his life – albeit implicitly – as best understood in the way that scholars of the highest authority have determined. This is not to say that it is a bad thing to have thirty-odd or fifty (or nearly 150) volumes of works by Marx and by Engels on the shelf, but rather that there might be losses, as well as gains. Gain and loss, of course, are relative to the reader and the project-in-hand, and I am certain that not all will agree with my 'take' on the situation. The object, however, is to invite further informed scrutiny, rather than simply to accept a product, even a scholarly one, at face value. The foregoing is not an argument that collected works should never have happened, or never be undertaken. Authors have released their texts – and the lives that they have lived – to readers and posterity generally, and so do not control the play of meanings as they develop among readers and scholars who work, sometimes at least, to interest audiences beyond specialist cliques. Taking Marx to be a philosopher (he was certainly skilled) works well for those interested in philosophy. The same is true for those interested in heterodox economic thinking (at which he was also skilled), and similarly for sociology, where he is standard reading and indeed taken as a founder. Collected works work hard to make these better activities, and richer experiences, even getting a

mention on television, in podcasts, and through social media from time to time.

However, even when – as in my discussion above – there is an effort to recontextualize these works as intrinsically and immediately political, that is, with specific target audiences in mind and messages tailored accordingly, the hierarchy within the collected-up canon reasserts itself. That hierarchy distinguishes between major works and minor ones, often on the basis of genre. Thus newspaper articles are included, but as mere journalism, and are little used by scholars. Conversely unpublished manuscripts and notes, including those never intended for publication or simply uncorrected and abandoned, are more easily elevated to canonical status and scholarly scrutiny, precisely because they are – or are taken to be – ‘works’ (rather than mere journalism), and are often identified as the solutions to puzzles (e.g. the exact terms of ‘the materialist interpretation of history’) or as the origin of a ‘new’ or ‘unknown’ Marx (e.g. the ‘humanist Marx’). In some cases there has been a process of ‘genre promotion’ through which quite a small work (e.g. a hasty preface to a little-read half-volume) becomes as important as a book,<sup>29</sup> or a pamphlet work gets re-published as a very slim volume, and then treated bibliographically as a book.<sup>30</sup>

Biographies are exercises in hindsight, and bibliographies are exercises in canon-formation. These are technologies of knowledge-production, and therefore of time-travelling immediacy. But to achieve this immediacy (and consequent ‘reality-effect’) these highly complex technologies strive to erase themselves, so that they do not spoil the view.<sup>31</sup> Technological smudges on this window-like transparency are generally banished to footnotes and appendices in scholarly works, where readers can engage with archival sources and secondary commentary. In popular works these traces of scholarly construction disappear altogether, or are banished to endnotes.<sup>32</sup> However, the auto- and other biographies of Marx have individual histories and methodologies, and each of these works itself has a context and a purpose. Marx cannot have the same ‘life and thought’, and rank-ordered list of ‘great works’, for anyone and everyone for all time, no matter who and where they are. Yet the definitive

intellectual biography lurks as a kind of Platonic ideal, or Weberian ideal-type, that Marxologists should supposedly be aiming for.<sup>33</sup>

Much the same problem with teleology and projection applies to what we think Marx looked like: the earliest images date from his late teens/early twenties, but few (other than his immediate family) then or now would recognize them as Marx, the youthful student-in-uniform, without some prompting. There is quite a big gap in time until the first real photograph – taken in his early forties, and with bushy beard – appears in the historical record, but he is not instantly recognizable as the Marx we know – and love or hate – until he was in his late fifties.<sup>34</sup> That magisterial and somewhat authoritarian ‘look’ was assimilated to a biographical *persona* that postdated the image by about a decade, and that grey-bearded face has become Marx-as-Marx in a timeless and – as seen in Highgate Cemetery in London – formidably stony way.<sup>35</sup>

Formal photographic portraiture is itself iconic, but only if the right kind of notoriety – akin in this case to hagiography and demonology – is intertextually constructed to go with the picture. Even when authenticated images do not survive or were never made, we line our pantheons with images that are larger-than-life, and that ‘want’ us to see them that way.<sup>36</sup> Their setting – whether in a building, as an outdoor monument or on a book cover – tells us at once that they are ‘great’. The cover portrait tells us already that a book is a biography, and with rare exceptions, not a book about a nobody. Few biographers remind us – other than in passing – of the ‘nobody’ images that are closer to the person who wrote then-unknown or little known works, or manuscripts that have since been constructed as ‘works’, over the years.

These essential elements of ‘greatness’ – meticulous bibliography, curated canon-formation and iconized images – have become major milestones in the intellectual biographies that have constructed, in various ways, Marx’s ‘life and thought’. This book suggests that we might pause for a bit and consider another view, and ask another question: what was he doing with the writing that we have, when he was thinking to ‘make a difference’ in politics, and thus making his own everyday and non-iconic ‘Marx’?

## Notes

1. [*Collected Essays of Karl Marx*].
2. CW 38: 614–15 n. 347.
3. [Political-Economic Review].
4. Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951 [1936]), p. 209.
5. CW 10: 5–6.
6. [*Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*].
7. See Rojahn, ‘Emergence of a Theory’.
8. See [Chapter 6](#) ‘Exploitation and Alienation’.
9. Copyright on Marx's works was due to run out in 1913; see Yulan Zhao, ‘The Historical Birth of the First Historical-Critical Edition of Marx–Engels–Gesamtausgabe [Part 1]’, *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 41:3 (2013), p. 325.
10. Yulan Zhao, ‘The Historical Birth of the First Historical-Critical Edition of Marx–Engels–Gesamtausgabe, Part 3’, *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 42:1 (2014): 12–24.
11. [*Complete Works*].
12. Zhao, ‘Historical Birth, Part 3’, pp. 16–18.
13. For a description and listing of the project, see <http://mega.bbaw.de/>
14. Zhao, ‘Historical Birth, Part 3’, p. 21.
15. <http://mega.bbaw.de/struktur>
16. Carver and Blank, *Political History*, chs 2 and 3.
17. See Yulan Zhao, ‘The Historical Birth of the First Historical-Critical Edition of Marx–Engels–Gesamtausgabe, Part 2’,

*Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 41(4) (2013): 491–4, for a detailed discussion of the intellectual and physical ‘cabinets’ through which Riazanov’s institute functioned, involving distinctions between theory and history, philosophy and economics and various other categorical divisions.

- [18.](#) My emphasis; *CW* 3: 229–346; see Rojahn, ‘Emergence of a Theory’, pp. 33–4.
- [19.](#) Rojahn actually argues that some of the intermingled quotations, summaries and ‘notes to self’ in Marx’s notebooks that were ignored by the various editors of the ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844’ are actually more interesting and significant in revealing the content and development of Marx’s thinking than the scattered passages of Marx’s more continuous prose that they collected from various loose pages and edited into ‘manuscripts’; ‘Emergence of a Theory’, pp. 36, 45 and *passim*.
- [20.](#) See [Chapter 5](#) ‘Capitalism and Exploitation’.
- [21.](#) Quoted in Zhao, ‘Historical Birth, Part 3’, p. 14.
- [22.](#) See Leopold, *Young Karl Marx*, for an outstanding recent exception to this general tendency, as is David McLellan’s published D.Phil. thesis, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (London: Macmillan, 1969), though the scholarship there is somewhat out of date.
- [23.](#) See [Chapter 2](#) ‘Class Struggle and Class Compromise’, and [Chapter 5](#) ‘Capitalism and Revolution’.
- [24.](#) [*Karl Marx: Chronicle of his Life Ordered by Date*]; Moscow: Marx–Engels–Lenin Institut, 1934.
- [25.](#) Wheen (*Karl Marx*, p. 1) apparently reverses this methodology by trying to ‘rediscover Karl Marx the man’, rather than Karl Marx the ‘great thinker’, but in his biography he merely inverts the usual focus on ‘thought’ by subtracting the thinking that went into the published and unpublished works from Marx’s actual ‘everyday’, leaving us with rather random ‘human’ touches.



- [26.](#) For a pioneering approach to Marx and canon-formation, see Paul Thomas, 'Critical Reception: Marx Then and Now', in *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 23–54; and see the Introduction and [Chapter 1](#) 'Making Marx "Marx" ' above.
- [27.](#) For details see Carver, *Engels*, ch. 5.
- [28.](#) Nicolaievsky and Maenchen-Helfen, *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*.
- [29.](#) For example, Marx's 'Preface' of 1859; *LPW* 158–62; *CW* 29: 261–6.
- [30.](#) For example, Marx and Engels's *Manifesto*; *LPW* 1–30; *CW* 6: 477–519.
- [31.](#) I am indebted here to Cynthia Weber's discussion of 'remediation' and 'reality-effect' in 'Popular Visual Language as Global Communication: The Remediation of United Airlines Flight 93', *Review of International Studies* 34:S1 (2008): 137–53.
- [32.](#) See, for example, Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999).
- [33.](#) Two very recent examples of the genre are: Sperber, *Karl Marx*; and Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*.
- [34.](#) For a gallery of authenticated images, see <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/photo/marx/index.htm>
- [35.](#) For this and other Marx images, some of which are quite fanciful, see the selection in <https://images.google.com>
- [36.](#) For a stimulating approach to visuality and images, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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# Marx

Terrell Carver

